

# Embracing Conflict and Practicing Respect: A New Choreography



Shifra Bronznick

IMAGINE AN EMPTY STAGE. The space has been cleared of all scenery and props, costumes and scripts. The curtains have been parted, the space is well-lit. Picture this stage as an invitation to volunteers and professionals to design a new choreography of our partnership. What will it take to create this new composition, to understand and reconfigure the powerful, artificial, loving, enmeshed, awkward, and inspiring relationship between professional and volunteer leaders?

To revise our partnership would require a certain degree of improvisation and a willingness to set aside, at least temporarily, our operating assumptions and organizational charts. Envisioning the future of our organizations should be at the crux of the collaboration between volunteers and professionals. But to map out a compelling and viable vision, we need to exercise a new form of joint leadership.

The test of groundbreaking leadership, according to influential thinkers in the field, is the capacity to orchestrate conflict. In his landmark book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins discovers that the first attribute of a great company is a leader who assembles the right team and aligns them with the right task, directs the team to confront the “brutal realities” of the environment, and cultivates controversy within, letting the team debate constructively until the best ideas emerge. Through this process, the team collaboratively identifies what the company will be best at that intersects with passion and financial viability.

In our community, we often find ourselves — volunteers and professionals — in situations that are exactly the reverse of the good-to-great company. We practice teamwork inconsistently, we avoid controversy, and we allow our internal political conflicts to seethe below the surface. Above ground, we indulge in unkind personal interactions or revert to manicured public conversation.

In the new choreography, volunteers and professionals would approach each other with kindness and respect. However, we would permit our conversations around ideas and goals to include genuine controversy without reprisals for unpopular views. We would cease

our pandering and manipulation and encourage authentic debate about the issues that ignite our passions.

We would strive to understand each other’s motivation. We would clarify our expectations

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of each other, and we would agree on the ways in which we could hold each other accountable. We would give feedback with respect and delicacy, commenting straightforwardly but thoughtfully about what is going well and what can be improved.

In the new choreography, we would be exquisitely mindful of the differences between us. For example, we might acknowledge, where appropriate, our social inequities and the resulting tensions that may emerge between our volunteer leaders, who are usually wealthy, and our professionals who often struggle mightily to manage the high cost of Jewish living.

We would address tensions along the “learning curve” as a team; for example, our volunteers sometime feel that their leadership capacity is thwarted by their limited mastery of the issues while our professionals, besieged by competing demands, may feel that the volunteer leader is yet another task to be managed, rather than a legitimate working partner.

The customary tensions of organizational life are often intensified and skewed in the context of the relationship between professionals and volunteers. Everyone is sensitive when it comes to receiving criticism, no matter how constructive, and we all bristle at careless, hurtful remarks. Paradoxically, despite the frequency of abrasive interpersonal


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exchanges, ultimately our organizational culture insists on making everyone “look good.” We need, instead, to create a climate where people are allowed to fail, to make mistakes in the pursuit of experimentation, innovation, and challenge.

A new choreography would require each of us to practice leadership in our respective arenas while respecting the subtleties of our complex relationship. As professionals, we

might begin to select our volunteer partners with greater discernment. As volunteer leaders, we would focus on the communal activities that make the best use of our time and talents. By practicing respect and encouraging controversy, we can leverage the leadership potential of the volunteer and professional partnership and set the stage for a powerful communal conversation that can transform the Jewish world. 

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## We Need Leadership, Not Leaders

Richard Hirsh

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I ONCE WORKED for a congregation that invited members to hold forth for five minutes on a topic of their choice on Yom Kippur afternoon, during what was known as “open microphone.” In my second year with the

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congregation, two minutes before Kol Nidre, a member handed me a copy of his presentation for the next afternoon.

A quick scan suggested a problem and I passed the sheet of paper to the chairperson of the High Holiday committee; after all, my job was simply to arrange the presentations. I did not pick the team; my job was to make up the batting order.

Two minutes after the end of the service, the same member stormed the *bima* to scream that I had censored him, although it was the High Holiday committee chairperson who had made the call. He reported his resignation from the *shul*, and that he was going to bring the issue to the board and demand justice (in that inverted order).

Who was in charge? Where was the authority? The power? Where would a resolution be found? What in fact *was* the issue?

The initial board discussions focused on ameliorating the aggrieved congregant and assigning blame, when the real question should have been: What kind of a synagogue system could account for such chaos?

Much of what passes for discussion of “best practices” in synagogue governance and rabbi-congregation relations still revolves around debates regarding power and authority: What belongs to the rabbi? The president?

The board? The congregation? And when issues do not fall neatly into the *reshut* (domain) of one party or another, the result is confusion (at best) and chaos (at worst).

What holds out the promise of being more productive is shifting the discussion from the polarizing issues of power and authority to the collaborative conversation that focuses on leadership, a term that, tellingly, has come to be conflated with and assumed to be the same as “leaders.” Of leaders, we have plenty; of leadership, properly understood, we have barely any.

“Collaborative,” “partnership,” and “systemic” are the terms of currency in the emerging “best practices” of organizational life. In his helpful book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Ronald Heifetz suggests leadership does not live in a person, a role, or a title (rabbi, president, board); leadership is an activity of the congregational system.

Leadership, Heifetz argues, is the ability to mobilize people to tap their collective resources in order to respond to the daily challenges, small and large, of keeping a system moving forward in a healthy way. Leadership is evidenced in the ability to get people to see the issues they face and to bring competing viewpoints into play; in the creating of a safe and sustained conversation where issues can be addressed; and in helping people understand that it is the shared meaning created in community, rather than in the insatiable individual happiness of each member, by which a congregation should evaluate itself.

Among the key findings in a Reconstructionist movement report titled *The Rabbi-Congregational Relationship: A Vision for the 21st Century* was the importance of refocusing the power struggles between rabbis and congre-

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