

Ideas in Jewish Education and Engagement

Creating A Soulful Organization

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We all need personal attention. We need to be seen for who we are, not only for what we do. Here, Aryeh Ben David suggests that any moment in our organization's life, from a board meeting to a major gifts dinner, can be an opportunity for human recognition, the celebration of relationships, and real intimacy.

Aryeh Ben David is the founder and director of [Ayeka: Center for Soulful Education](#). Please visit their site to learn more and find out how to bring Ayeka to your community.

Creating a Soulful Organization

At our last board meeting, we asked a particular strident member to say a few words about himself.

It was just after Tisha B'Av and he spoke very personally about how difficult the day had been for him. How our history of tragedies and persecutions shatter him. He spoke of how he, a deeply religious person, feels like his whole belief system and trust in God is just swept away. How he is left with no answers, just a hope that we can continue to provide a *tikkun* (healing) for the world despite the brokenness.

Afterward, we asked him to offer a blessing for our meeting. He quietly whispered a prayer that our organization should find the wisdom and strength to generate a continuing *tikkun* (repair) of our world.

We always begin our meetings with personal words and then a prayer for the success of the meeting. Why?

How much do we really know about the people in our organization? How much time have we dedicated to getting to know what is going on in their lives beyond the hours of their work? Or what happened in their lives before they began to work at our organization?

The goal of our work is holy; the means also should be holy. Many organizations believe that the supreme importance of their mission eclipses the need for personal or individual relating. But we all need this personal attention. We need to be seen for who we are, not only for what we do.

At Ayeka, before we race to our to-do list, we begin our Board meetings and weekly staff meetings with two "I-Thou" exercises:

1. Words of Prayer: We ask a staff member to offer words of personal prayer to help direct and focus our meeting

2. **Personal Story:** We invite a staff member to share something that is going on in his/her life that is significant but not directly connected to our work.

This whole process of prayer and sharing takes about 10 minutes. It is an investment in the soul of our organization.

Words of Prayer

Before any sacred endeavor it is worthwhile to pray:

- That the next engagement will be without personal vanity, devoted to a higher purpose, and conducted in harmonious friendship
- That we will listen to each other's voices
- That we will be granted wisdom and intuition to succeed in our goals.

Prayer is not limited to the synagogue or the words of the prayer book. The goal is not only to pray — but also to become a prayerful human being. So too, we can become prayerful organizations — working off an inner, higher, purer energy.

Some organizations begin their meetings with a *d'var Torah*. While this may be beneficial for sharing an idea or setting a tone, it often ends the conversation rather than evoking further reflection.

Offering a personal prayer is usually awkward and unnatural. By and large, Judaism does not offer many places for sharing words from the heart and most of our staff felt uncomfortable doing this the first time. We all had feelings like: “Am I doing this right? Are my words banal or cliché? How religious should I be? Can I be funny or is this a solemn thing?” But by the second round we realized that the only rules were to be sincere and heartfelt.

The spontaneous personal prayer offered at the beginning of our meeting sets a mindful, reflective, and spiritual tone that permeates everything we do. The prayer itself takes only a couple of minutes, but is invaluable for creating an environment of harmony and caring. It dispels our ego voices and reminds us that we are involved and dedicated to a vision much greater than any of us individually.

Personal Story

A member of our board or staff shares something going on in his/her life. We pose the question: “What is taking up your bandwidth now?” This takes just a few minutes and we allow time for a question or two.

Tragically, many organizations create “I-It” relationships. People are engaged and valued for how they function within the parameters of organizational goals. Employees become data for metrics, related to only in terms of how well they are executing their job.

During our personal sharings we have discovered how Ayeka’s board and staff are struggling with health, financial, family, and housing issues. We have heard stories of family tension, children crises, and also personal dreams and hopes. We ask: What is occupying the bandwidth of your life now? We have learned much more about what each of us is carrying, and we are all carrying a lot.

What is the effect of this personal sharing time?

- Staff members have remarked that our staff meetings are a highlight of their week
- Longevity — staff members feel appreciated, even loved, and we have practically no turnover
- People put in 110 percent because they feel valued for who they are, not only for what they produce for the organization.

Furthermore, these two exercises have a long-term effect. Every organization goes through struggles and sometimes crises. If the board and staff connections are not strong, not been time has been invested in developing personal caring and bonds, then the fabric of the organization may quickly unravel. When people feel cared about, when there are personal relationships, then it is easier to weather the difficult times.

Tikkun olam begins with *tikkun* at home — in my personal life, my family, my community, and my organization. We cannot create a more compassionate world if we do not first create a more compassionate organization.

Later on in the meeting mentioned above, this same board member became particular strident, as is his way. But after having listened to his personal words and prayer, we all had a bit more patience and restraint. The discussion did not escalate and feelings were not offended. A small *tikkun*, a prayer answered.

Jewish organizations are very clear about our sacred goals. We need to dedicate more time and thought to the sacred process that leads to these goals.

<https://jewishfederations.org/education-and-engagement/ideas-in-jewish-education-and-engagement/creating-a-soulful-organization>

