



Planting Seeds: Investing in Growing Talent for the Field

By Elissa Maier

Many respected scholars, leadership experts and successful business leaders speak about the importance of investing in talent. Jim Collins talks of “getting the right people on the bus;” Jack Welch comments that “talent development deserves as much focus as financial capital management in corporations,” while Mort Mandel puts it simply: “It’s all about Who.” It’s clear that organizations are urged to focus more and more on the people and the relationships alongside the systems. Recently at the JPRO Network gathering in Detroit, this theme permeated throughout the program. There was a consistent message of the importance of attracting, developing and retaining talent as a critical factor that drives the success of any organization.

As the program was reaching the conclusion, field leaders had the opportunity to be interviewed by rising leaders, creating a unique setting for participant engagement. Conversations focused on what senior leaders have learned throughout their career and, in looking back, ways in which their current knowledge may have informed their decisions differently. This provided an opportunity for all to reflect on how the field continues to evolve.

As I was interviewed by a colleague I mentor, I recalled the often-told story about the sage who plants a carob tree. When asked why he is planting the tree when he will not live to benefit from the fruits of his labor, he responds that he is planting the tree for his children and their children.

Based on my experience, I have developed a framework of 10 steps that we can rely on to ensure that we plant the seeds for the growth of our professional leaders. It is through this investment that we will build for the future of the Jewish community.

1. Create the time and space to be a mentor. Prioritize it in your schedule. Being a mentor is sacred work, so when meeting with your mentee, give them your undivided attention.
2. Offer opportunities to learn. Invite your mentee to help with meetings, programs and events that they would otherwise not attend. Invite them to observe board meetings.

Don't forget to debrief the experience so they can ask questions about things they might want to understand better.

3. Encourage your mentees to get fundraising experience. It is a skill will always enhance one's leadership.
4. Show them the power of peers and encourage them to find or create a peer cohort. I have watched groups of emerging professionals create their own learning cohort. They intentionally plan to come together to share their experiences, support each other and learn together. Having a group of supporters and cheerleaders can keep you going – and having a group that will challenge you and ask you tough questions will help you to grow.
5. Arrange coffee chats. My daughter recently did an internship in the finance industry. The interns were encouraged to make coffee dates across the firm so that they could learn about the work of the whole organization. I love this concept! Mentees: branch beyond your mentor – it's great to learn from all different people. Experienced leaders: take the time to have a coffee with new or unexpected colleagues!
6. Word to the wise – don't forget to learn the "hard" skills. Yes, planning a program is fun, but knowing how to navigate a budget is a critical skill in being an effective leader.
7. Share inspiration. Enhance your conversations by sharing and discussing an interesting article you read, a podcast you listened to or a TED Talk you watched.
8. Learning is a two-way street. As you teach, take the opportunity to listen and learn. Let the student also be the teacher. This will model for your mentee how to learn from everyone, and it allows them to begin to develop a voice of their own.
9. Walk the walk and talk the talk. Lead by example. Your mentee will learn so much from how you communicate with them, how you manage and prioritize your time and how you navigate challenging situations.
10. It's all about relationships. Our business is built on relationships. Ultimately, our ability to partner with others is what will drive our success. Relationships come in all different ways and as mentors our own effectiveness can be greatly enhanced by learning from new voices. Invest in relationships that will continue to grow the Jewish professional world.

I have been fortunate to have an incredible group of mentors throughout my professional career, and the most essential lesson they have taught me is the importance of paying it forward. As much as I have been able to share with the outstanding professionals whom I

have mentored, my own work has been so greatly enhanced by what I have learned from them.

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