



The pandemic is teaching CEOs how to say ‘no’

The ebbing of the pandemic is a moment of opportunity — and stress — for Jewish nonprofits

Howard Libit was diagnosed with COVID-19 right before Thanksgiving, spending a night in the hospital with breathing problems before being discharged. Once home, he quickly took up his duties again as executive director of the Baltimore Jewish Council, a community relations, advocacy and interfaith group. His colleagues tried to let him rest. He put naps on his calendar, and was “pretty good” about taking them — for a while. Now fully recovered, Libit has learned one thing from the pandemic. “The mental wear and tear is real,” he told *eJewishPhilanthropy*. “I’m trying to say ‘no’ to stuff. I have to.”

It’s still not easy to do, though, for Libit and his colleagues at other Jewish organizations, said Gali Cooks, CEO of Leading Edge, a nonprofit that provides consulting to upper-level managers and human resources professionals at more than 350 Jewish groups. And as the pandemic hits the one-year mark, the question of whether and when managers should say “no” has become even more fraught. They are exhausted, and know their coworkers are as well. Yet as vaccines become more widely available, organization heads feel increasingly compelled both to sustain their pace, and to seize the day.

“Leaders are caught in this tension between ‘survive and thrive,’” she said. “We know this is an unbelievable moment, but summoning up the energy to think about the next chapter is challenging.”

The pandemic’s anniversary is causing a broad “second wave of depression” — in the nonprofit, private and public sectors, said Marty Linsky, a professor at Harvard University’s Kennedy School who wrote *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* and is on

Leading Edge's board. The pandemic triggered confusion, disorientation and disruption when it started, followed by adaptation and a "can-do" period. Now, there is widespread exhaustion, he said.

Heather Moran, the CEO and executive director of the Sixth & I Historic Synagogue, a community center and synagogue in Washington, D.C., has learned over the course of the pandemic to even say no to funding, she said.

"As nonprofits, we're all used to operating from a place of hunger," she said. "One of the things I have been trying to do is say that just because an opportunity is there, doesn't mean we need to apply. There have been things that would have taken a lot of brainpower that would have been incredible opportunities, that we have not pursued, and I am at peace with that."

The Reset Grant program announced Feb. 22 by the Jewish Community Response and Impact Fund (JCRIF) is the most recent high-profile funding opportunity. It offers up to \$10 million, over as many as five years, for "big ideas" that can lead to systematic change, but organizations who are not already thinking on the scale shouldn't try to start just in order to apply, said Felicia Herman, JCRIF's director.

"The pandemic has opened many leaders' eyes to new opportunities, given them new insights, created new partnerships or strengthened existing ones," she said. "But many organizations are not thinking this way, and that's OK."

JCRIF is extending the deadline for letters of inquiry by two weeks, to April 9; has updated its request for proposals and will be holding a webinar on March 10 to answer questions, Herman said.

Some groups' highest priority has to be just getting through the pandemic, Herman added. Cooks said that about a dozen CEOs at Jewish organizations, including Libit, contracted COVID-19. Some groups were able to create contingency plans early in

the pandemic in case the CEO needed to go on extended leave, and others are still trying to do so, but some have more urgent priorities.

Libit himself learned to make meticulous plans in advance of maternity leaves when one of his employees went into early labor. After contracting and recovering from COVID-19, he wants to create something similar for his own job, but knows that it would be a very difficult thing to put together over Zoom.

Likewise, many managers struggle to take care of their own health, both physical and mental, Linsky said.

Leading Edge's surveys show that the large majority of CEOs and other managers have not taken vacation.

"There's this tension between the need to take care of yourself and the feeling that doing so is self-indulgent," Linsky said. "People need to see that it is a responsibility to the organization, not just themselves. You can't bring your A-game if you're working 24-7."

Moran said she tries to actively encourage people to practice self-care, but that vacation in particular has lost some of its power to help people recharge. "People say, 'I can't go anywhere or see anyone, so taking a break feels like a waste.'" She also tries to have conversations about the extra burdens of remote work, such as "resting Zoom face" — the blank expression that can easily be interpreted as negative.

Prizmah, the day school support organization, is holding weekly check-ins for peers in the same job, from heads of school to guidance counselors to classroom teachers, said Cheryl Weiner Rosenberg, Prizmah's senior director of marketing and communications.

“Most of the people in schools have been working relentlessly without a break,” said Paul Bernstein, Prizmah’s CEO. “Summer didn’t really happen for them last year.” Linsky suggested that managers and employees try to think about the future in such a way that gives them power to create it, instead of trying to figure out what is going to happen to them.

Overwhelming stress is rooted in a sense of powerlessness, said Andres Spokoiny, CEO of the Jewish Funders Network, a service group for donors who give at least \$25,000 a year to Jewish causes. In the beginning of the pandemic, he said, funders tried to give grantees more of a sense of control by offering more long-term funding in addition to services like technical assistance, as described in a letter to grantees signed by 18 foundations, including Crown Family Philanthropies, the Koret, Leichtag and Marcus Foundations and the Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah.

Moran said local donors have also offered to increase their unrestricted gifts.

Anecdotally, Spokoiny said he’s heard that donors will continue to offer longer-term funding and ease administrative requirements, and that they are aware of grantees’ fatigue and are talking about how to help on that front.

JCRIF has made some grants in response to mental health challenges among clergy, Herman said.

“Many funders are acutely aware of how incredibly hard Jewish communal professionals are working right now, on top of all of the additional challenges the pandemic is imposing on individuals and on families,” she said. JCRIF’s funders — the Jim Joseph Foundation, the Maimonides Fund, The Paul E. Singer Foundation, the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies and the Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel Foundation — recognize that the issue is a “core area of need.”

The managers who work with Leading Edge are mostly still in “wait-and-see” mode, Cooks said. Some are wondering if they might be able to take a vacation in the summer, but the virus has conditioned them to live with uncertainty.

One of Leading Edge's goals is to make sure that when Jewish groups resume some form of in-person work that they think about emotional health in addition to physical safety, Cooks said.

Moran tries every week to master the chaos by deciding her four most important goals. When she feels overwhelmed, she asks herself if what she is doing will help achieve them. Sometimes, that means she needs to shuffle her priorities. But taking the time to think the week through in advance is essential.

“You have to go through that strategic process, and not just be on the train that's going, going, going,” she said. “Or that train will end up in Burnout City.”

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