



What the “New Normal” Might Look Like in the Jewish Community

By Keith Krivitzky

A diverse group of Jewish professionals and thinkers gathered recently for a series of ZOOM roundtables to examine the question: “What would the *new normal* look like in the Jewish community?”

Communities and organizations are just starting to emerge from this Corona Crisis. They will be facing a world filled with many uncertainties. Business models and approaches that worked before, to a greater ... or often lesser degree, may be at risk as a new normal sets in.

Effective leaders will often be those who recognize when what worked before no longer does; organizations that are most successful in the future will be those best able to adapt and take advantage of opportunities. To best navigate this change and make smart strategic decisions, leaders need to ask the right questions in terms of how “new normal” trends can impact operations, service delivery, and the ability to deliver on an organization’s mission.

What follows are highlights of this discussion on key trends, drivers, and takeaways from this crisis:

Uncertainty will continue

There are 3 key phases in crisis recovery, and we are moving from the survival phase to recovery and a return to normalcy. However, there is no clear transition between these stages, and uncertainty will continue well into the future, depending on region and other externalities.

While it is challenging to plan in this environment, it is important to think about – and think differently about – how things can be in the future: the third phase of long-term rebuilding and transformation. Smart scenario planning is critical.

Opportunities exist, but change is difficult and inertia is a strong limiting factor

There are opportunities to be successful and even grow in this crisis. However, there is concern about the power of inertia and whether organizational leaders are up to the task of grappling with change.

Many direct service agencies demonstrated their value and numerous independent grassroots efforts were started to meet needs not addressed. Business models that rely on membership or facilities are at risk and may need to be adjusted. Though many may opt for a return to business as usual or make incremental changes, those organizations with the best ability to survive – and thrive – will be those that embrace change and innovation.

Those that are laser-focused on the execution of their mission will be best positioned to succeed

Not only is this crisis disruptive, it is a huge opportunity for disruption. Leaders should be asking how their organization will compete in a new world? Those that are smart and nimble are more likely to succeed; those that try to do too many things, don't do them well, or aren't focused ... will be in trouble. Competition, from both inside and outside the Jewish world, can put pressure on many. To be successful and emerge from this crisis stronger, organizations and leaders will need to focus on their value proposition, what is mission critical, and the quality of outcomes rather than the inputs or process.

What do your “customers” want?

People are clamoring for meaning and connection more than ever and are open to finding that in non-conventional ways; the explosion of Zoom seders is an example, which many will now incorporate into their annual observance. Community is the best protection/vaccine from the social isolation many have experienced during this period – which may mean the establishment of a new set of rituals, mechanisms, and activities developed during this period.

At the same time consumer behavior will be more fragmented and decision-making more individualized; many may decide that they are not ready to come back to in-person community yet ... or if ever for some more vulnerable populations. Online in real time and on-demand activities will be more of an expectation – which has implications for service delivery, relationship-building, and “affiliation” models.

Priorities have shifted and will continue to shift

Many individuals and families are worried about their financial situation. This will impact behavior and what they are willing to invest in terms of donations or services. There will also be a shift in financial support by many funders from “luxury” or “elective” causes and programs, such as arts and culture, to essential activities like addressing food insecurity and health care.

This shift will exacerbate the previous trend of redirecting overseas funding to more local needs. Anti-Semitism and community security are still important issues, but there will be even more competition from other new and longstanding pressing needs.

Raises vital questions about organizational sustainability and financial health

More organizations are going to be on financially fragile ground after this crisis. This will further fuel a previous trend towards mergers and consolidation, as well as new explorations of collaboration such as shared services and back-office operations. The aftermath of this crisis provides a unique opportunity to have discussions that might not have been politically acceptable prior ... assuming there is leadership to provoke the right questions to drive exploration forward.

Importance of Leadership

Communities need visionary and bold leadership in times of crisis. Consensus-driven leadership models, the dynamics of governance, and organizational bureaucracy may be an impediment for embracing necessary change. A key challenge/opportunity will be coming up with the right frameworks and incentives to raise the right questions and have risky conversations ... among lay leaders and professionals who might fear a loss of organizational identity and be reluctant to embrace change.

Evolving and increasingly important role of major funders and foundations

Foundations and major funders, including some big Federations, that can pivot rapidly and deploy resources to meet real-time challenges emerge stronger out of this crisis. This reinforces a trend where funders have increasingly been driving the philanthropic conversation, and even more opportunities exist for them to help drive change by deploying funding in strategic ways – from encouraging collaboration and mergers to

exploring new service delivery models. At the same time, there is concern that funders who are only accountable to themselves shouldn't set the agenda unilaterally.

These are trends that nonprofit organizations will need to come to terms with. The ability to get ahead of the curve and plan for change in a strategic way *in the face of continued uncertainty* will distinguish organizations that are successful from those that are diminished or fail. This requires leadership that can both look beyond the immediate needs of survival and resist the urge to just get back to normal at the first opportunity. Welcome to the "new normal."

Thanks to the Roundtable participants for their participation and feedback on this summary:

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For more information about these roundtables, a more detailed package of information, or information about the New Normal Project, contact Keith at theideabank@gmail.com.

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