



# Being Heard: What We Owe Jewish Community Professionals

February 7, 2019 By [Seth Cohen](#)

In never-ending assessment of the greatest challenges facing the contemporary Jewish community, there is a rogues' gallery of threats and complications (Anti-Semitism! Iran! Non-Affiliation! Israel-Diaspora Relations!). These topics grab the headlines and dominate *Shabbat* dinner tables, they are debated by the scholars and commentators, and they are leveraged as calling-cards for fundraising campaigns.

But in my opinion, there is a threat greater than any of those listed above. It is far more universal and closer to home than any of us acknowledge. It is the subtle and pervasive diminishment of respect for the real engines of our community institutions and our very community itself: professional leadership and staff.

Having now been on both sides of the volunteer and professional spectrum in the Jewish communal world, I have an appreciation for the roles both categories of leadership play in supporting community development. But more significantly, after almost eight years from a vantage point that introduced me to a wide range of professionals in the Jewish community, I have come away with an even greater realization: there is much work to do to increase the support, respect and appreciation we demonstrate for those working on the frontlines of our community. And this isn't just the work of national professional development organizations and the large foundations that support them, but it is the work of every single employer and every single volunteer leader that helps guide those organizations.

Part of my realization comes from the high value that was placed on professional development during my time as a community professional. I was privileged to work at an organization that deeply valued the perspectives of its staff and also emphasized these values in tangible and intangible ways. While

the organization I worked at undeniably had more resources at its disposal to support the development of its professional team, what was striking to me is the leadership's encouragement of a culture of respect and interdependency. More than just being acknowledged, as a professional I always felt my perspectives were valued, and moreover, heard.

I know there are other organizational cultures that share similar values, but I am increasingly worried this is still the exception and not the rule, and that we are not doing enough as a community to train present and future volunteer leaders and philanthropists how to engage with professionals that lead our community. Far too often I hear volunteer leaders speak dismissively of the quality of the Jewish community professionals they work with, and I simultaneously hear professionals express frustration that their ideas and insights aren't being heard by their volunteer counterparts who think they "know better" than the in-the-trenches staff.

This dynamic is not new. For far too long we have overly praised volunteers for bringing outside expertise to our organizations, while underinvesting in the ongoing professional development of the individuals that work in the field full time. While some funders have recognized this imbalance and are investing deeply in strategies that try to elevate the professionalism of the field (and the overall work satisfaction of the professionals), the challenge is far too endemic within our community to be solved from the top down. It needs to be solved from the bottom up. Failure to do so will continue the (oftentimes silent) frustration of our professionals, the diminishment of appeal in pursuing careers in the Jewish community, and the overall deterioration of the fundamental partnership between professional and volunteer leaders that helped create much of the community infrastructure we benefit from today.

So how can we face this challenge and rebalance the way we not only value but also invest in Jewish community professionals? I have four modest suggestions.

First, we can focus more effort on fostering truly open and honest dialogues between professional and volunteer leaders that begin to create a sense of candor about the challenges facing local Jewish community professionals. We need to bring these conversations out of the shadows and into the boardrooms of our organizations, and we need to do so in ways that level the conversation so that the professionals can speak honestly, and so volunteer leaders can hear clearly.

Second, we must invest more resources in strategies and tactics that support Jewish community professional development beyond the C-suite. While organizations like Leading Edge are providing essential resources for C-level and emerging senior professional leaders, and a range of national and local fellowship programs are also providing strategic support for rising stars, there remains a key need for professional development resources for those deeper down in organizational structures. When the full range of professionals who dedicate their careers to our communities benefit from a greater investment in professional development, not only will our professionals' skills be reinforced, but it will help make the field more appealing to future professionals.

Third, we need to enhance the training we provide to our volunteer leaders with respect to the Jewish values that not only should guide our organizations, but should also guide our interactions on an interpersonal level. Onboarding of volunteer leaders, at every level of leadership, should include a meaningful effort to educate the lay leaders about how to interact with professional workforce in constructive ways. These onboarding modules (and continuing education) should focus on training volunteers on how to sensitively manage the inherent power dynamics that exist in the volunteer/professional interaction, as well as how to recognize and reinforce the critical role professional expertise plays in helping solve community challenges.

Fourth, we need a greater effort to acknowledge the role of Jewish professionals by celebrating their contributions and achievements. One idea is that we make the month of May Jewish Professional Appreciation month. Since May is already Jewish American Heritage month, it would be a great moment to increase awareness of the contributions that Jewish professionals of all backgrounds make to strengthen our communities in the United States (and beyond). While I can argue that the appreciation for these professionals should not only be one month of the year, making one month a specific moment of recognition would be a great start.

Critically, rather than wait for the professionals themselves to advocate for the four suggestions above, one thing we can do as volunteer allies for our professional colleagues is to take the leadership role of initiating these measures. There is something inherently uncomfortable (and unfair) in forcing Jewish professionals to be the loudest advocates for their own voices. The responsibility of advocating for respect towards (and the investment in) Jewish professionals should come from those volunteers who are most familiar with the work, as well as those community members who benefit from the work.

In other words, the mantle of advocacy for our professional partners rests on all of us.

In 2019, there is no lack of challenges facing the Jewish community, and no lack of individuals who seek to meet those challenges head on. Fortunately, a significant number of those individuals commit themselves to serve as professionals in our community, oftentimes sacrificing higher salaries and experiences they might possess if they chose different career paths. They shouldn't ever, however, need to sacrifice their entitlement to be valued, heard and invested in.

We owe our community professionals more than our thanks. We owe them our commitment to support their drive towards excellence and the ever-evolving strengthening of the field. We have a lot of work to do to meet that commitment. But the first step is the perhaps the easiest.

Let's make sure they are heard.

*Seth Cohen is the founder of Applied Optimism, a consulting and experience design lab that helps organizations and communities design optimistic solutions to complex organizational, communal and individual challenges. Seth can be reached at [seth@appliedoptimism.com](mailto:seth@appliedoptimism.com) and at [www.appliedoptimism.com](http://www.appliedoptimism.com)*

Source: <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/being-heard-what-we-owe-jewish-community-professionals>