

Attending the Crisis of Leadership



Developing a Theory of Jewish Day School Leadership

◆ by Michael Berger

The AVI CHAI Foundation, the largest investor in programs to develop Jewish day school leadership, draws lessons from its experience in this area and offers nine functions essential to this work.

This article refers to a document on Jewish educational leadership created by AVI CHAI. This document can be found at the end of this piece.

The original article can be found at: <http://www.ravsak.org/news/478/169/Developing-a-Theory-of-Jewish-Day-School-Leadership/d,HaYidion#document>

When The AVI CHAI Foundation began to turn its attention to day schools in 1994, it did so with the research-backed conviction that in contemporary America, these Jewish institutions had the unique capacity to help create generations of young Jews aware of and committed to their history, people and religious tradition. It did not take long for the trustees and staff to understand that one of the main pillars upon which good schools stood was effective leadership, and so AVI CHAI began to invest both in existing leadership programs and in helping to develop new ones to meet the needs of contemporary day schools.

It was natural, therefore, that as AVI CHAI began to plan for its 2020 sunset several years ago, the trustees and staff chose leadership as one of the areas to explore how the Foundation might be able to have a lasting impact. To pursue this goal, we formed an ad hoc working group together with several PEJE staff members with deep knowledge in the field of school leadership and leadership development.

Our first task was to research and then formulate theories for effective day school leadership and for effective programs that nurture them. Guided by these theories, we believed AVI CHAI would be in the best position to invest its ultimately depleting resources wisely and strategically. We appreciate the editors of *HaYidion* inviting us to share our current summary document on a Theory of Day School Leadership with the field, both in print and on-line, in the hope of sparking conversation and generating constructive feedback.

Leadership: more complex than ever

Needless to say, leading private schools in contemporary North America, and especially Jewish day schools, has become a very complex job. At the same time as the number of stakeholders and their needs (and often demands) has grown, resources have shrunk considerably, and most day schools still aim to offer a Jewish education to any student and family desiring one.

Additionally, in almost every respect, the religious, social, and communal landscape in which day schools must operate has become more challenging. Managing these complex forces takes multiple and varied skills and capacities, reflecting the many challenges American Jewry faces in building a lasting and firm Jewish identity among our children and families. The high turnover of school leaders is just one symptom of the demanding—and increasingly draining—nature of day school leadership.

Much of the literature on leadership focuses on personal qualities (often related to social intelligence) and effective management strategies (time, personnel, change). We certainly agreed these are core to any successful leader, and included those that were especially important for day schools (see #7-9, and their explanations, below). But we found many of these qualities and strategies to be context-specific and not necessarily generalizable.

Rather, we started with a two-fold premise: 1) the contemporary complexity of running day schools requires a *leadership team* rather than an individual leader; and 2) effective teams require an understanding of the various “areas of function” to better delegate and organize themselves. While we might all wish for the ideal leadership structure and team-members, we all know that the reality of most day schools, particularly smaller ones, is that administrators are deployed to their areas of strength or effectiveness, often leading to gaps (or overlaps) in the running of the school. We believe the list of leadership functions has significant, practical implications, which will be enumerated below.

We identified nine distinct areas of day school functions that require effective leadership:

1. Setting Vision, Priorities

With the many claims being made on day schools, it is vital that they be pointed in a clear direction to know where to head and of what to steer clear. Professional leaders are needed to help chart this path, along with lay leadership, and even greater skills are needed to provide skillful and savvy navigation towards the goal. In a word, no day school can function effectively without this vision.

2. Jewish Lens

Many stakeholders—parents, board members, even communal leaders—often want the day school to compete with local private and public schools that offer excellent education. However, it is the Jewish character of a day school that is its primary source of distinctiveness; only the leadership can ensure that the varied yet integrated aspects of the school are infused with and express this Jewish mission. Without this function, the Jewishness of a school can quickly be confined to an isolated feature of the program rather than stand proudly as the school’s *raison d’etre*.

3. Understanding Context

Like any living organism, to survive and thrive a school must not only coordinate its internal pieces but also deal appropriately with its environment. Day schools necessarily function within

larger social, cultural and institutional contexts. For a school to succeed, leadership must use its higher perch—what Harvard’s Ron Heifetz calls “going up to the balcony”—to gain awareness of the various currents running in the school’s wider environment and figure out how best to respond. Additionally, leadership must proactively maintain contacts with the many elements of its setting—other Jewish and non-Jewish schools, synagogues, Federations, etc.—fostering relationships and seeking synergies where possible.

4. Data Driven Assessment and Accountability

In our society, a leader’s charisma and intuition can take a school very far, but both eventually run out (or leave). For schools to be sustainable long-term, leadership must model an approach to problem-solving that is based on data assessment and accountability. These transparent processes are characteristic of successful enterprises generally, and only leadership can ensure that a school’s many systems adopt them.

5. Building Staff Capacities

Good organizations foster growth among all their members, generating personal satisfaction and high morale. Schools are of course focused on the growth of children, but good schools are known for cultivating all their members’ growth. Leadership, which lives in the present but always keeps an eye on the future, gently pushes everyone on staff to stretch beyond his/her comfort zones, and also constantly maintains information channels and keeps an eye out for talent should a position open.

6. Collaboration

Some leaders prefer to ride in as the Lone Ranger and save the day, but you’ll always find a Tonto—even several Tontos—at the side of the best leaders. At the top of successful schools we regularly find distributed leadership, and a willingness to work together with other individuals and organizations to maximize the positive outcome by sharing resources.

7. Communication

Day schools—even small ones—have so many people involved in their daily functioning in and out of the building that there is always the risk that people will begin to do their own thing. To calibrate all these individuals and activities requires skilled communication coupled with a high level of emotional intelligence. Whether in personal conversation, public speeches, or the written letter or article, leadership uses communication skills to advocate for the school and keep the many stakeholders “on the same page.”

8. Learning and Self-Reflection

There is a tendency among some boards to search for ideal leaders, but the reality is that effective schools are led by individuals who themselves are “CLO’s”—Chief Learning Officers. The ability—and willingness—to look critically at one’s own actions and decisions, to seek out

others' perspectives and feedback and re-think positions are the modeling at the top that typifies all great organizations.

9. Self-Management Capabilities

This is probably the hardest, but without it, day school leaders are sure to burn out. The complexity of day schools has a way of generating its own powerful gravitational pull that overwhelms leaders, stretching to the point of ineffectiveness or exhaustion, whichever comes first. Effective leaders preserve their energies and monitor how they use their time.

We tried to explain briefly each of these nine areas that we found critical (and irreducible) in day school leadership. To see more detail and bullets under each area, please go to www.ravsak.org/hayidion/AVICHAI.

How to use this document

While our work is based on the research of others, The AVI CHAI Foundation has several hopes for this document.

First, we would appreciate practitioners' feedback: does this list resonate with your own sense of leadership positions in day school? With your own experience? Are there *capacities* or *functions* that are missing from our list? We realize all leaders must stretch themselves to learn new things; leaders who began as great educators may need to learn budgeting, or IT, or fundraising depending on their position. But we were less interested in naming those systems within day schools than in focusing on the areas of function and leadership skills. Please respond at this link: www.ravsak.org/hayidion/AVICHAI.

Second, as we noted above, we believe this document can be put to practical use. For instance, leaders can review the list and identify which areas they have mastered and which they want to develop further and round out their set of capacities. This could lead to more defined or focused professional development plans for leaders. Head Support and Review Committees can similarly use this document as a basis or rubric for evaluating a leader's performance and identify which areas might need more attention in the coming years.

Third, we want to underscore once again that while it would be simpler and more convenient for boards to "expect it all" of a single person, it is not realistic to find all these capacities in a single person—nor ought they be. We endorse the current push for distributed leadership; just as lay leadership is manifest in multi-person boards with a chair, so too professional leadership is best arrayed in a similarly distributed structure. Thus, we perceive that *within a day school's leadership team*, these nine capacities ought to be covered.

Taking the distributed leadership approach in reading this document could help with hiring decisions by locating which capacities are covered by existing administrators, and which capacities are missing. The list can help in evaluation of "admin teams" or enable more constructive professional development plans. Minimally, we believe putting all nine capacities in print highlights how difficult and complex day school leadership has become, and it might push

day school lay leadership to be more supportive and have more reasonable expectations of its current and future professional leaders. And that in turn will bring to the field more qualified people who realize the job is challenging but doable.

In sum, we wanted to spark a long overdue conversation for the field of day school education. We desperately need quality leadership to run an institution we believe is vital to American Jewry's future. Talking about "leaders" without specifying the capacities the job entails is meaningless. We hope this document is a constructive first step in that direction.♦

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A Framework for Effective Jewish Educational Leadership

■ by **THE AVI CHAI FOUNDATION**

Setting Vision, Priorities

Effective leaders:

- envision a positive operational and educational future for the organization;
- pursue that vision with relentless focus;
- influence others to move in those directions;
- ensure their achievements are sustained beyond their tenure and/or through transition;
- regularly realign educational systems toward the continual improvement of instruction, optimal student learning, and the realization of the Jewish mission.

Jewish Lens

Leaders of Jewish institutions:

- view all their goals and actions through the prism of their Jewish mission;
- see their school as critical to the development of students' Jewish literacy and identity;
- continually deepen their understanding of the Jewish values their school espouses;
- ensure that the values are enacted in the daily life of the institution;
- acknowledge diversity in individual commitment and communal involvement with Judaism;
- see their school as an integral institution for the future of the Jewish People.

Understanding Context

Effective leaders:

- know, understand and analyze the organizational context of their schools;
- can understand school cultures and sub-cultures;
- keep abreast of, and are sensitive, to changes in the Jewish community and the world of education;
- have a large repertoire of organizational knowledge and practices and the capacity to choose from that repertoire as appropriate to the context.

Data Driven Assessment and Accountability

Effective leaders:

- monitor a variety of data related to all areas of JDS functioning, including, e.g., enrollment and financial data, pupils' achievements and progress and the quality of teaching;
- employ evidence-based decision-making (i.e., subjecting each possible solution to rigorous standards and evaluation based on data collection and analyzed over time);
- understand themselves as accountable to their boards, staffs, parents, and students.

Building Staff Capacities

Strong leaders:

- develop and empower staffs by distributing leadership;
- share authority and responsibility for achievement;
- effectively build and cultivate leadership teams, and know how to function as an effective member of a team;
- have an eye on leadership succession, both within their schools and for the field as a whole, by identifying qualified candidates and grooming them to be future leaders;
- are instructional leaders, creating an environment conducive to learning for both children and adults;
- lead by example and in turn build learning organizations which drive school improvement and promote the Jewish mission of the school.

Collaboration

Leaders of Jewish day schools:

- are effective collaborators both within the school and with related constituencies in the community at large;
- promote collaborative cultures in their schools at all levels: among teachers, students, staff and volunteer leaders.

Successful collaboration means the harnessing of diverse ideas into wise action in support of the growth and development of the school, its students, and the Jewish People.

Communication

Strong communication skills are integral to effective leadership. Skills include:

- explicitly promoting the school and its mission, especially the Jewish goals and character of the school
- maintaining ongoing, honest and open 2-way communications with all constituencies
- keeping all stakeholders informed of progress toward high priority goals
- promoting listening as a critical communication skill
- maintaining strong relationships with volunteer leaders
- advocating for the school and telling its “story” in a compelling way to diverse constituencies

Learning and Self-Reflection

Leadership involves continuous learning and self-reflection.

Effective leaders:

- exhibit openness to self-examination, the ability to admit mistakes and learn from them;
- are dedicated to turn learning into practical action;
- continuously learn from and seek out sources to keep abreast of new research and proven practices.

Self-Management Capabilities

Effective leaders:

- understand that their actions heighten their salience and their impact on others;
- cultivate awareness of their own emotional states;
- learn to manage their behaviors in ways that strengthen school culture and model school values;
- balance conflicting demands and maintain an appropriate work/life equilibrium.