

SYNERGY: Imagining the Synagogue of the 21st Century
Jan 9, 2006
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Introduction

- I am delighted to be here and be included, especially with such wonderful expertise and experience in the room today. Why am I here? Perhaps due to my weird combination of having grown up as a rabbi's kid in and around a synagogue for many years — thanks to my father of blessed memory, Leon Jick — and then professionally working with leaders in corporate settings on leadership and organizational issues, which led me back to the synagogue to see what might apply. It brought me to do some work in Boston at the Leadership Development Institute, under the aegis of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies, intending to apply my organizational know-how to synagogue leadership teams of lay and professionals, as well as have a therapeutic value of integrating these two big experiences in my life!
- Amy Sales has given us lots of food for thought, and I will weave my knowledge of synagogues with my perspective from the private sector and comment on three questions:
 - How do organizations intermesh their “business” with their “mission,” what is ironically called “higher purpose”?
 - How do we create energy and engagement in organizations, with all the benefits Amy notes?
 - Why is change so hard, and yet what do we know about the ingredients for effective change interventions?
- Before addressing each of these, there are two observations to begin with. Amy has concluded that all synagogues seem unique and, if so, the ability to understand and intervene is even more difficult because it is always “custom work.” I am skeptical on this point. Whenever I am introduced to a new client — a corporate entity — one of the first things I always hear is “we’re unique”! The more I probe with an experienced eye that has assessed many different organizations, the more skeptical I get. Are they really so unique?
- My most popular case study, written at Harvard in 1986, is still in the top 10 of Harvard’s cases today. It is about a company in Chicago that manufactured twist-cap closings for bottles, a distant and seemingly unique world far from most companies, much less synagogues. But the story is actually about an entity with a lot of cherished family-style traditions that is not keeping up with the times (the onset of plastic containers) and needs change, but has a culture that seems resistant. I have taught this case to people from every industry — to people in synagogues and the public sector, and to people at different levels of organizations — and they all say the same: “That’s our story ... TODAY!” It is indeed an archetype or even a vessel through which many organizations can see themselves. The underlying issue is very common and not unique at all.

- Thus, I am suggesting at the outset that there may be more similarities than not in the class of institutions called “synagogues” — and even in the broader category of what might be called “organizations,” including corporate ones; thus, we may have more to transfer and generalize from than Amy argues. At the same time, things like the role of the rabbi may have some unique features to consider along the way. So perhaps we will need to keep asking the question about what is really unique and what perhaps is less so!
- My second observation at the outset comes from a more personal experience growing up in a rabbinic home as a rabbi’s kid. My dad of blessed memory, Leon Jick, who died last May, gave many sermons over the years, testing out the first concepts at our Shabbat meals. We loved this. It stimulated us. We saw his passion up close. We were solving big issues together as a family. But we spared no amount of kidding as we discovered that, more often than not, they had the same theme or question: “The Jewish People — Flourishing or Floundering?” followed by “The Synagogue — Flourishing or Floundering?” and for Yom Kippur, “The Jew in You — Flourishing or Floundering?”
- And so it feels like déjà vu, in a reassuring and familiar way. The same basic question; the eternal question: Are we hopeful or doomed? Can we make things better? My dad’s seminal book, *The Americanization of the Synagogue*, traced our questions today, from the early evolution of our synagogues starting in the 19th century here. I am honored and privileged to carry on these timeless conversations!
- So, I’d like to offer a perspective on Amy’s interesting questions with these two observations as a backdrop and from my knowledge of how synagogues and corporate organizations have addressed these in parallel ways.

Question One

- Let me offer a few thoughts on the first question, “How can synergy be achieved between the business of a synagogue and the Jewish mission of the congregation?” Interestingly, this is a question that is also being asked in the private sector. Corporations in the last 10 years have been challenged to go beyond their narrow mission of profits, and instead there is talk about “higher purpose,” such as creating a community within or being a good citizen in the larger community; or serving customers; or just “doing good to do well,” as Jeff Swartz at Timberland calls it. It seems that these institutions can’t exist and persist unless there is more to them that makes them feel — dare I say — more “congregational,” and even in some instances “spiritual.”
- My own professional work includes something called “values-based management,” helping companies to articulate and live a set of “values” to be the North Star or compass for the community rules of engagement — values such as teamwork, excellence, innovation, and integrity. These are essentially “contracts” among people to live by — or dare I say they are “covenants”!

- Interestingly, synagogues typically begin with their higher purpose as a given and then struggle to deal with their institutional management (for example, paying people appropriately, succession planning, capital campaigns, marketing), terms very common in the business world. What an irony that corporations are seeking to be more like congregations and synagogues are trying to act more like corporations!
- To strike such a balance within corporations today requires a lot of efforts to inculcate values, aligning them into daily habits through training, role modeling, incentives, and constant communication. It is more instinctive to “manage for profits” as the operating internal software than by values, so extra attention must be paid to the latter. Perhaps for synagogues, there is more natural habit around rituals and values, while there is a less natural habit in knowing how to do the business and management of the institution.
- To do so is clearly a balancing act, as Amy suggests, but one that I have seen accomplished in the corporate world, as long as people appreciate that these are constructive tensions, requiring not “either/or” thinking but “both/and”. For example, a good understanding of customers qua congregants is good business practice, but it also can lead to programming that provides more meaningful and spiritual experiences for all.
- The Leadership Development Institute referenced earlier is premised on helping leadership teams thread three themes into its work: 1) Business-management best practices, 2) lessons from Jewish history about leadership responsibilities and guidance, and 3) Jewish spirituality. In other words, synergy can be found between synagogue and congregational community, just as companies have found synergies and ways of doing good to help a company do well! Perhaps we can also posit that good congregational communities are also good business.

Question Two

- The second question I want to comment on is, “How do we reach people on an affective and religious level?” In the corporate world, the question used to be, “How do we get more employee satisfaction, so that employees will be more productive?” Interestingly, that question is less in favor today than an enhanced and different one, “How do we increase employee ENGAGEMENT?” Engagement is defined as “the state of emotional and intellectual commitment to an organization or group!” Sounds similar to Amy’s question!
- There is a hierarchy proposed — satisfaction is how much I LIKE things here; commitment is how much I WANT to be here; but engagement is how much I WANT AND ACTUALLY DO to improve business. In congregational terms, how much people contribute and engage is the highest form of affiliation that we hope to create.
- How do they measure engagement in the corporate scene? With six main measures:
 1. I would not hesitate to recommend this place to a friend seeking employment.

2. I tell others great things about working here.
 3. It would take a lot to get me to leave here.
 4. I rarely think about leaving here to go somewhere else.
 5. This place inspires me to do my best work every day.
 6. This place motivates me to contribute more than is normally required to complete my work.
- I think we could take these same indicators and assess how well engaged our congregants are and what might need some “beefing up” to increase engagement. For example, “I would not hesitate to recommend this synagogue to a friend” or “This place inspires me to do my best spiritual or Jewish communal work” or “This synagogue motivates me to contribute more than is normally required!”. The questions work and are quite provocative when you think about them.
 - Companies today are measuring and continually monitoring these indicators, and then are acting upon them, to increase the level of engagement. On average, company norms suggest about 52 percent engagement, whereas Amy’s study suggests that it may be quite a bit lower at 20 percent in synagogue life. So, synagogues perhaps need to do the same kind of monitoring — of the level of “engagement,” not just the level of satisfaction or commitment. And more than monitor it, the task is to engender and enhance the opportunities for engagement. When our customers or congregants become our best salespeople, we’ll know we’re making a lot of progress!

Question Three

- The third and final issue for my comment is about change — a workshop topic for this afternoon. The question I pose from Amy’s research is, “Why is change so difficult?” Here is where the corporate sector may appear to be different, as companies today must be changing and adapting if they want to survive. It seems “out with the old and in with the new” is the mantra. Conversely, Jewish institutions might be considered to be in the business of preservation — tradition, rituals, and age-old symbols are the heart of what our rich history provides for us to sustain, not change.
- Again, there may be more grey here than meets the black-and-white eyes. Corporations that want change ironically find it easier to pronounce that some things will not change (for example, values, brand identity, headquarters locations), and so they, too, are balancing constancy and change. And while Jewish life in synagogues must indeed have a lot of constancy, we do have a movement called “Reform,” and we know that Jewish institutions compete with many other demands and opportunities for people’s time. Today, especially, their very survival depends on some degree of flexibility, innovation, and adaptation. So, again, perhaps more similarities than differences exist.
- If change is needed in synagogues, what can we learn from corporate change? Well, corporate change is often characterized as too slow and cumbersome, and that is the case even though there are seemingly many enablers that are not present in

synagogues — hierarchy to “command” it, incentives to reward it, and job security to threaten it.

- I did a study some years ago of 15 companies undergoing change, and monitoring the change-agent teams of each company as they made their plans and assessing their progress nine months later. I found something a bit dismaying: they all underestimated the resistance they would face, the constituencies that would be impacted, and the time that it would take — but, not to worry, they did overestimate one thing: the clarity of their plans! They discovered that the work of change is indeed **HARD WORK**, and that the efforts to overcome the odds take careful consideration of all the key constituencies and their needs, a lot of dialogue, and encountering resistance of various kinds. The “x factor” was the strong commitment of the leaders, having their own convictions of what’s needed combined with a healthy respect for the process of bringing people on board. I published a chapter called “The Ten Commandments of Managing Change,” offering the rock-solid dos and don’ts while hoping they would be followed more than the original Commandments!
- You are more experienced in synagogue change than me or Michael Hammer is, and you know there are constituencies galore that must be addressed, informal opinion leaders that must be involved, and endless meetings that must be held. But there are tips that help — enablers or pilots, and phase-ins, and even a little strong backbone or “advocacy” as Amy called it — to bring about reform and innovations that are needed. My field is that of managing change, so while I am a realist that it often takes longer than imagined and desired, I am also a realist that without these changes, institutional arthritis and rigor mortis can all too readily occur — and we can’t afford that in Jewish communities today.
- Perhaps, as in corporate life, the most important task for congregations desiring change is to articulate what must change, but also, loudly and clearly, what must be **PRESERVED**. It is finding the optimal balance that is the real work here, and then best practices from managing change can follow!

Conclusion

- Amy’s three questions clearly parallel big questions in corporate organizations today. I have tried to bring a few insights and observations from the private sector to indicate that the challenges, and even some of the solutions, may have more commonalities with synagogues than first imagined. There are ways to blend business purposes with higher purposes. There are ways to have our employees or our congregants become our best “salespeople” to engage in ways that excite and become infectious in drawing in others. And there are ways to preserve and to change, finding the right balance of maintaining moorings and traditions that provide constancy and security and depth, but at the same time adapting and flexing with each new era’s challenges and opportunities.
- Companies can become “communities” responsive to the intangible needs being expressed by its members to become a part of something larger than making profits.

And synagogues can take the beauty of our traditions from the “prophets” and also learn to become well-managed institutions while at the same time engaging congregants in deeply meaningful ways, changing and innovating as needed.

- I have found corporations that have accomplished this. Amy has found synagogues that have accomplished this. And though there is a delicate balance separating flourishing and floundering, I am optimistic that we can strengthen institutions to be more meaningful AND more effective ... and even more *Hamish*, thrown in for good measure!