

How are Jewish boards different from all other boards?

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By Alicia S. Oberman March 13, 2024

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"Are Jewish boards different than other nonprofit boards?"

As senior adviser for board leadership at Leading Edge, I am frequently asked this question; and when people ask it, I often wonder whether they're hoping for me to say yes or no.



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The answer, in any case, is that both are true: Jewish boards are like all other boards in many ways, and different in others.

For possibly the first time ever, we can reflect on the unique qualities of Jewish boards based on extensive data. A new report by Leading Edge, “Jewish Nonprofit Boards: CEO Perceptions & Actions for Better Governance,” shares insights on how CEOs of Jewish nonprofits perceive their boards and compares it with perceptions of boards in the general nonprofit sector. The data on the Jewish nonprofit sector came from a survey of 304 CEOs in May 2023 as well as 36 CEO interviews in the summer of 2023; and the data on the general nonprofit sector was drawn from BoardSource’s biannual industry benchmark study, “Leading with Intent, 2021.”

The report also shares practical actions Jewish nonprofits can take to improve their board effectiveness. Just this week in eJP, the Jim Joseph Foundation’s Barry Finestone called on our field to “do more to activate boards.” This new report shows us how.

First, let’s look at how the report found Jewish boards are similar to others:

- 1. Boards provide tremendous value.**

CEOs of Jewish nonprofits overwhelmingly agree that their boards make a positive impact on their organizations, provide support and partnership to the CEO, communicate well, respond well to crises and fiscally oversee their organizations responsibly. BoardSource finds that CEOs in the general nonprofit sector tend to rate their boards' performance highly in areas like understanding the organization's mission, fiscal oversight, legal and ethical oversight, and projecting a positive public image of the organization. Boards — Jewish and otherwise — provide invaluable service.

2. Many boards need to level up their CEO evaluations.

CEO oversight is a primary and non-negotiable board responsibility. However, only 59% of the Jewish nonprofit CEOs we surveyed report receiving an annual evaluation from their board. That's slightly ahead of, but fairly close to, the larger nonprofit sector (53%). Nonprofits as a whole have a long way to go.

3. Most boards are not meeting CEOs' fundraising expectations.

Engaging boards in fundraising is a perennial source of challenge and frustration for CEOs and professional teams across the nonprofit sector. According to BoardSource, "[i]n every study that BoardSource has done over more than 20 years, boards and executives continue to rate the board's role in fundraising as one of the lowest areas of board performance." When BoardSource asked CEOs to rate their boards on fundraising, 47% rated them as below average or failing. Similarly, 45% of the Jewish nonprofit CEOs we surveyed agree that their boards offer appropriate fundraising support.

4.) Many boards don't prioritize strategic planning.

Setting the vision and long-term strategy for the organization is a key part of the board's responsibilities. But only 48% of the Jewish nonprofit CEOs we surveyed agree that their boards engage positively around strategic planning; 49% of CEOs from BoardSource's study rate their boards excellent or above average at setting their organization's strategic direction; and 46% rate their boards' strategic thinking as average or above average. (Among Jewish nonprofits, organizations with a national focus perform markedly better at strategic planning and some other metrics than locally focused organizations. See page 49-50 of our report for more details and possible explanations.)

5.) All nonprofit boards need a broader composition.

The data behind our new report was a survey of CEOs, not board members, so we don't (yet!) have solid data about Jewish nonprofit board demographics. But we do have data supporting an inference that the Jewish community's boards, like those of the broader sector, need to diversify. While 72% of Jewish nonprofit CEOs feel that their boards understand the diversity of their communities, only about half feel that their boards are *representative* of their communities. Meanwhile, 41% of CEOs from BoardSource's study rate their boards as below average or failing

when it comes to “building a diverse and inclusive board with a commitment to equality.” Since the research is clear that boards with broader composition perform better across multiple measures, this is an area that all boards should prioritize.

Those are just some of the ways Jewish boards are similar to nonprofit boards more broadly. Other overlapping areas include the need for more ambassadorship, the need to ground boards’ work in explicit values more frequently, and more.

OK, so *mah nishtanah* — how are Jewish boards different from all other boards?

1. Jewish board chairs arrive better prepared for their roles.

Among Jewish nonprofit CEOs, 81% agreed that their board chairs were well prepared to take on the role, while only 54% of leaders in BoardSource’s study agreed with a roughly equivalent question. Both Leading Edge’s and BoardSource’s data demonstrate the importance of board chairs for the CEO, the board and the organization as a whole, so that’s an incredible strength to celebrate.

One possible reason behind that strength also indicates a possible growth area for the Jewish communal field: Jewish organizations are more likely to “recycle” their board chairs. In BoardSource’s study, 62% of board chairs in the nonprofit sector overall are new to their role and 38% have been board chairs before; in our study, just 45% of board chairs were new to the role and 55% had been chairs before. The results are mixed: Jewish boards seem to be missing out on opportunities to elevate new leaders, but benefiting from our seasoned board leadership’s levels of experience.

2. It is easier for Jewish boards (but still difficult for everyone) to recruit high-quality board members.

While the Jewish population is small within North America, our data around recruiting board members generally is *more* positive than the overall sector. Among Jewish nonprofit CEOs, 45% agree that “it is fairly easy to recruit high-quality board members to join the board,” but only 30% of BoardSource’s respondents overall find it easy to find “to find people to serve on your board.” Note that the Jewish community has a higher favorability score, despite the fact that Leading Edge included the words “high-quality” in our version of the question and BoardSource didn’t. Note also that board recruitment is a significant struggle for a *majority* of organizations, Jewish and general alike — just a bit less of a struggle for the Jewish community.

3. Jewish boards do less self-evaluation and accountability than general nonprofit boards.

Only 36% of Jewish nonprofit CEOs agree that their boards hold individual members accountable for fulfilling their roles and responsibilities. Just 15% of CEOs we surveyed agreed that “the board evaluates its own work against [clear annual] goals at least every two years.” In the BoardSource study, 47% of CEOs indicated that their boards had conducted a formal written self-assessment

within the past two years. Our question for Jewish organizations represents a lower bar — it doesn't specify formal written evaluation — and even so, less of the Jewish field meets that standard than general nonprofits meet BoardSource's *higher* bar of a formal written evaluation. The same BoardSource study also demonstrated the value of such assessments: When organizations' boards have assessed themselves in the past two years, those organizations' CEOs rate their boards higher across all performance markers compared with organizations where the boards assess themselves less frequently.

Board self-accountability and peer accountability are vital. Too often, holding board members accountable falls to the CEO — but simply put, that is not the CEO's job. The CEO reports to the board, not vice-versa.

4. Jewish boards are even less prepared for CEO succession than general nonprofit boards.

A lack of CEO succession planning is consistent across the nonprofit field. BoardSource finds that only 29% of organizations have a written succession plan or policy to guide the board when the CEO transitions, and just 27% have a written emergency plan. However, the Jewish nonprofit sector is lagging even that low general standard. Only 14% of the Jewish nonprofit CEOs we surveyed indicated that their organization has a long-term succession plan, while 30% have an emergency succession plan (just 9% have both). Two-thirds (66%) reported that they had neither plan in place. Planned or unplanned, leadership transitions *will* happen; being ready has enormous value to the board, the professional team and the organization's work.

Leading Edge's new report gives us new insights into Jewish boards from the perspective of CEOs, but the field needs data from board leaders and members themselves to get a more complete picture. This task is more complicated than it seems, and researchers consistently struggle to collect board member perspectives. Still, stay tuned — within the next year, Leading Edge hopes to have more to say on that subject.

Our boards are alike, our boards are different — but most importantly, our boards are vital. Using the power of data, let's work together to support their growth and effectiveness, for the benefit of our collective future.

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