

THE GENDER GAP IN JEWISH NONPROFIT LEADERSHIP

AN ECOSYSTEM VIEW



IN PARTNERSHIP WITH: THE STARFISH INSTITUTE



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All background photos by [Unsplash](#) and [Pexels](#)

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a light-colored button-down shirt under a dark blazer, is smiling and pointing with a white marker at a whiteboard. Another person's hand and arm are visible in the foreground, also holding a marker. The background is a blurred office setting with windows and papers on the wall.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Qualitative research into people's experiences and expertise helped us posit **71 causes to the persistent gender gap in top leadership at Jewish nonprofits**; quantitative network analysis suggested **five "keystones"** among them.

BACKGROUND

Most people working at Jewish nonprofits are women. **But most CEOs of Jewish nonprofits—especially at the largest organizations—are men.** In 2019, Leading Edge launched an investigation to better understand why that is, and how the field might begin to change it.



I don't believe Jewish communities are setting out to be unwelcoming. But they need to understand that when they look at a candidate and can't get past the candidate's race or gender or sexual orientation... that they are bringing biases that don't need to be there in hiring."

RABBI SANDRA LAWSON

Director of Racial Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Reconstructing Judaism

WHY THIS ISSUE?

At Leading Edge we believe that the most important marker of an effective organization is its leadership. In order to maximize their ability to fulfill their vital missions, Jewish nonprofits need to draw on the best available talent. Yet the Jewish community's leadership is not drawn from the full range of its people, which suggests that our field is missing out on the contributions of many phenomenal potential leaders. **A more representative set of leaders would be better able to understand and serve the entire Jewish community, ultimately delivering better outcomes for everyone in it.**



Moreover, as our sector continues to adapt and change in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the rapidly changing nature of our work and the communities in which we operate make it even more desirable for our field to benefit from diverse perspectives at the helms of our organizations. Yet just as this crisis has heightened the need for diverse leadership, it may simultaneously make this goal harder to achieve; nearly half a million more women than men left the workforce during the [pandemic](#), and women's labor force participation has dropped to levels not seen since 1988.

WHY LEADING EDGE?

Leading Edge was founded with a mandate to strengthen the leadership pipeline for the entire Jewish nonprofit sector. We do many things to further that goal, including executive professional development; resources for boards and search committees; surveys that help organizations improve their employees' experience at work; platforms for talent managers to connect and support one another; and more.

Any barrier or challenge that prevents Jewish nonprofit leadership from reaching its highest potential is relevant to Leading Edge's mission, and the leadership gender gap indicates one such challenge.¹

¹ While this report focuses on gender inequity, many other forms of identity—and biases against those identities—affect Jewish organizational life. The experiences of transgender and nonbinary leaders and employees in our sector are particularly relevant to gender dynamics operating in our field, and since this report does not provide an in-depth analysis of those dynamics, they remain an avenue for further exploration in the future. More broadly, issues related to race, nationality, disability, and many other forms of identity also play a role in how different leaders and employees experience our sector, including affecting the ways that issues of gender themselves come into play. While this report shares a view of this issue through the lens of gender, other lenses remain relevant as well.



Background

Talent and ability are distributed throughout the Jewish population and the broader population as a whole, but some segments of the community are underrepresented among our top leadership. Investigating and addressing whatever factors are causing this imbalance can help prevent Jewish organizations from missing out on strong leaders whose talents are currently untapped. In this report, we discuss issues related to gender—recognizing that other forms of underrepresentation are present at the same time, and likewise present avenues for further study.

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Issues involving identity, diversity, and equity often strike a nerve. People and institutions differ sharply on how to understand, prioritize, and address these issues. Such differences are inevitable, and can be healthy.

Leading Edge does not present this study or its findings as an exclusive, complete, definitive, or comprehensive solution for this problem. If closing the leadership gender gap were easy, it would have been done long ago. This issue, like other social problems, is multifaceted and complex. And its “solutions” are not clear-cut. For that reason, we don’t emerge from our research with an exhaustive set of prescriptions. We do emerge with a newly focused agenda for making progress, and five concrete ideas for getting started.

HISTORY AND PROGRESS

The leadership gender gap is not unique to the Jewish nonprofit sector, nor did Leading Edge discover it. Scholars, leaders, and practitioners have been analyzing it and working to address it for decades. In the broader community, the [“Women in the Workplace”](#) work of Lean In and McKinsey and the research of [Prof. Iris Bohnet](#), among countless other contributions, have advanced our knowledge of the roots and branches of this problem. In the Jewish community, as Shifra Bronznick, Didi Goldenhar, and Marty Linsky documented in their groundbreaking 2008 guidebook, [Leveling the Playing Field](#), “gender inequity is embedded in Jewish organizational life.” Many other Jewish institutions—including [Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community](#) and the [SRE Network \(Safety, Respect, Equity\)](#), which represents 140+ organizations—have also made invaluable contributions to understanding and addressing this problem.



Background

Recent years have yielded some discernible improvements. For example:

- Nearly 50% of Jewish Federation top executives are women—though women tend to lead smaller federations.
- A few high-profile Jewish communal executive searches in 2020 chose women for top jobs, including at JDC and the Jewish Theological Seminary.
- In Jewish human service agencies, fully 70% of top executives are women. (This may be less a reflection of social change and more a reflection of cultural norms, present both in the Jewish community and in our wider cultural context, that link women with nurturing and care.)
- Leading Edge’s annual Employee Experience Survey data may indicate a degree of progress. In 2018, 70% of participating organizations were led by men, but in 2021, male-led organizations are just 53% of participating organizations. (Neither the 2018 ratio nor the 2021 ratio can be said to definitively represent the entire sector, since only several hundred non-randomly selected organizations take the Leading Edge Employee Experience Survey, out of a field with an estimated 10,000 organizations. Nor is the group of organizations identical between one year and the next, so a change in rate can’t with full confidence be attributed completely to change within a given set of organizations. Still, without treating the numbers as precise, the magnitude and direction of this change may indicate some level of real progress.)

Background

These data points represent some degree of forward momentum on this issue.

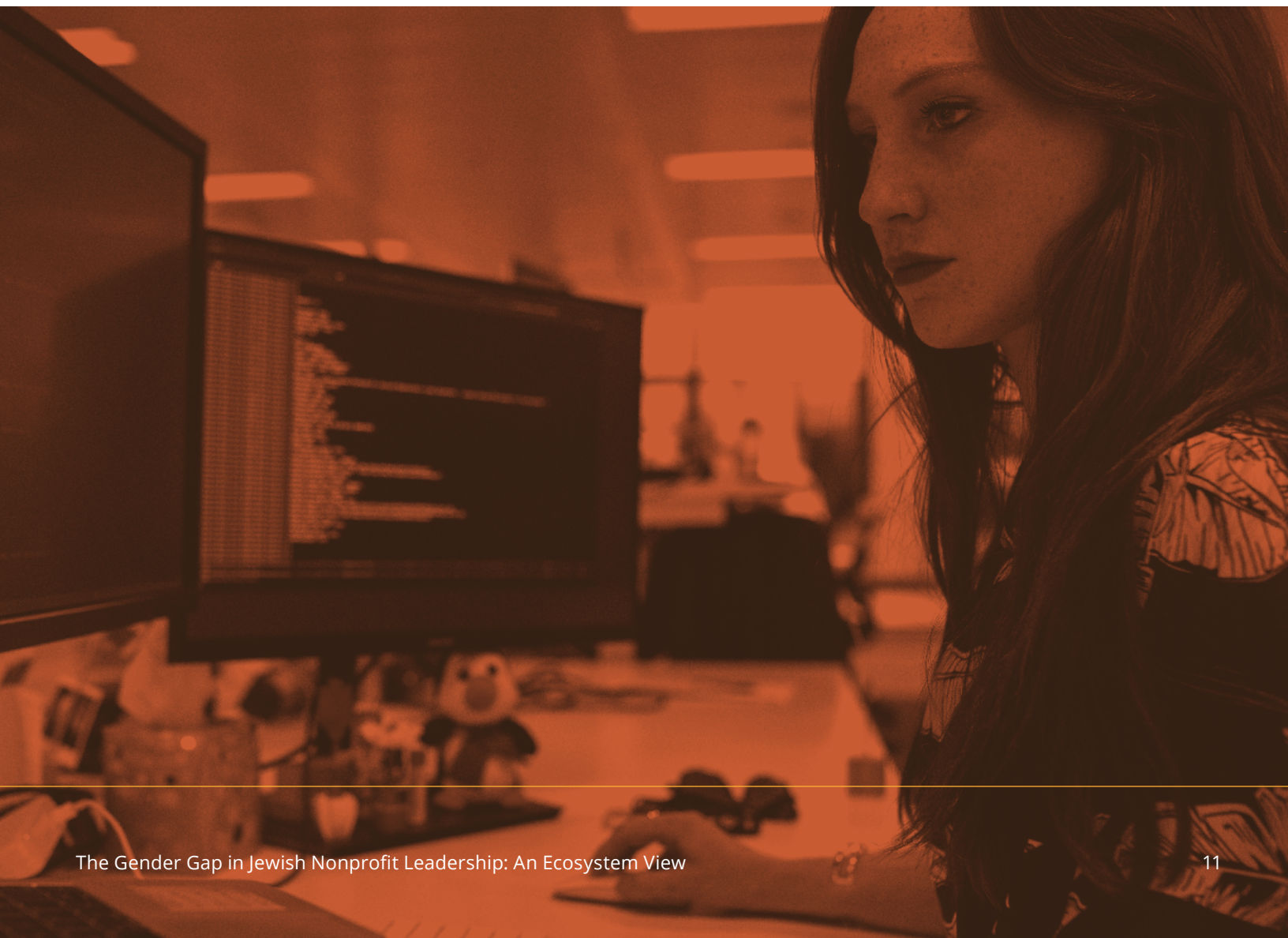
Yet significant and long-standing imbalances persist:

-
- A large majority of major Jewish summer camps are led by men.
-
- Almost two-thirds of JCC top executives are men.
-
- Out of 17 Federations serving large metropolitan areas, 16 top executives (94%) are men.
-
- Data from Leading Edge's Employee Experience Survey and Pulse Surveys show a trend analogous to the situation in the Federation field. Of the 376 organizations that have taken one or both surveys (2016 through 2021), men lead 55%, but they lead many more of the largest organizations. Out of participating organizations with budgets of \$10 million or more, 65% are led by men. Out of the largest participating organizations—those with budgets of \$60 million or more—11 out of 12 (92%) are led by men. Among participating organizations with budgets under \$2 million, by contrast, women lead 60%.

Background


These are significant imbalances. As the Federation system and Leading Edge's Employee Experience Survey data show, **the gender gap in top leadership at Jewish organizations may be improving as defined by a raw count of organizations, but when measured by funding and staffing—important forms and indicators of power—a large imbalance remains.**

Still, the progress we have seen to date demonstrates that change is achievable.



PROCESS (ON ONE FOOT)

In this exploration, Leading Edge partnered with [The Starfish Institute](#), an organization that has developed a methodology for applying network science to understanding complex social problems at a systemic level.

A photograph of two women sitting and talking, overlaid with a dark orange tint. The woman on the left has short blonde hair and is wearing a patterned top. The woman on the right has long dark hair and is wearing a dark top. They are both smiling and looking at each other.

There is no road without curves; there is no road without traps; there is no road without branchings."

SIFREI DEVARIM 20:4

Process (On One Foot)

That approach is laid out in [“Ending Teacher Shortages with Network Mapping,”](#) an article by Talia Milgrom-Elcott and Eric L. Berlow in *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. They first applied this method to better understanding the challenges of building the K-12 STEM teacher pipeline and have since also partnered with the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, AARP, Dell, and Johnson & Johnson to map different challenges and uncover opportunities.

Together, over the course of 18 months, we engaged over 1,200 people to define as many distinct causes of the persistent gender gap in top leadership at Jewish nonprofit organizations as we could identify. We then mapped how those causes likely interact with one another as an ecosystem. Our process included reviewing relevant literature, conducting in-depth expert interviews, convening half-day workshops and peer-led listening sessions, fielding surveys and a crowd-sourced computer game, uncovering positive deviants (bright spots where things are going well), and more. To understand our research process in detail, [see this document](#) for a full explanation of the methodology.



Process (On One Foot)

Qualitative research into people's experiences and expertise helped us posit 71 causes; quantitative network analysis suggested five "keystones" among them.

"Keystone" is a technical term, short for "keystone species." The Starfish Institute borrows this term from the science of ecology, in which "a keystone species is an organism that helps define an entire ecosystem. Without its keystone species, the ecosystem would be dramatically different or cease to exist altogether." ([*National Geographic*](#).) In the ecosystem of factors we have mapped, **keystones are factors that have high "reach," which means they affect many other issues, and high "leverage," which means they are influenced by few others.** Solving them may be difficult, but doing so could create a large ripple effect on other causes of the problem.



A dark, moody photograph of two women leaning over a table, looking at a laptop screen. The woman on the left has long blonde hair and is wearing a striped shirt. The woman on the right has dark hair, wears glasses, and a large earring. The image is overlaid with a dark blue/purple gradient.

THE FIVE KEYSTONES

Each Keystone cause implies a **Keystone opportunity** to discuss, test, evaluate, and implement solutions.

Learn more: leadingedge.org/gender-equity

The Five Keystones

#1

Cause: Boards, funders, and others in power don't always hold Jewish organizations accountable for addressing the diversity of their top leadership.

Opportunity: Boards, funders, and other powerful stakeholders can hold Jewish organizations accountable and incentivize them to elevate diverse leadership teams.

#2

Cause: Many Jewish organizations have no talent strategy for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

Opportunity: Jewish nonprofit organizations can implement talent strategies to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

#3

Cause: Some members of search committees and boards hold biases about what makes a qualified leader.

Opportunity: Search committees, and the boards that appoint them, can implement processes to ensure that the work of the search committee is professional, equitable, and fair and that the most qualified candidate is chosen for the role.

#4

Cause: There is a perception that you cannot be both a top leader and a primary caregiver.

Opportunity: Community members can work actively to shift our cultural assumptions about the capacity to be a leader and a primary caregiver at the same time.

#5

Cause: Not enough men speak out about or prioritize addressing the gender gap in top leadership.

Opportunity: Institutions can give men the knowledge, support, and incentives to speak out and address the gender gap in leadership (and DEI more broadly).

WHAT THE KEYSTONES MEAN

The keystones are not the *only* causes of the problem; their value, by definition, comes from their relationships to a large number of other causes that they affect. Nor are the keystones the most “important” causes per se. Our analysis did not attempt to evaluate, quantify, or rank which causes most intensely affect the gender gap in top leadership in their direct capacity as individual causes. Rather, our analysis began from a premise that many factors simultaneously contribute to creating and maintaining this gap, and that solving the problem will therefore require changing many factors at once. Our network analysis of how a large number of causes interact with one another suggests that these five keystone factors have decidedly more potential than the other factors we identified to make an outsized impact across the whole network. **Moving these five causes, we believe, would move many more.**



The Five Keystones

The keystones are not action steps; they are points of focus. They are an opportunity to shrink the problem. If the energy of those seeking gender equity in top leadership is currently being split in more than 70 directions, this analysis suggests that the same amount of energy may achieve more if applied in just five directions instead.

Making progress on each keystone will require a detailed agenda of action steps. In the coming months and years, Leading Edge will provide resources and tools that identify some such action steps. We have also begun two further streams of in-depth investigation, focused on the Orthodox community and the CEO search process.

Beyond any individual organization, we hope these five keystones can serve as a catalyst that propels and aligns new efforts to establish processes, change behaviors, change systems, and, ultimately, close the gap. How best to advance each of these five keystones deserves prolonged **study, discussion, experimentation, and evaluation** over time. Within and beyond the Jewish community, **different experts, different organizations, and different stakeholders will advance and prioritize different ideas and actions** in an effort to achieve them. We welcome the robust debate that this will entail. And we hope that as many people and organizations as possible in our field will **align toward these five keystone opportunities and work together to advance them.**

BRIGHT SPOTS

In this section, **we offer five bright spots—one for each keystone**—highlighting just one example of ongoing work that is advancing each area.



Portrait from ikar.org

Moral leadership [is] the kind that fuels people's resolve, reminding them to think expansively and open-heartedly about what is possible."

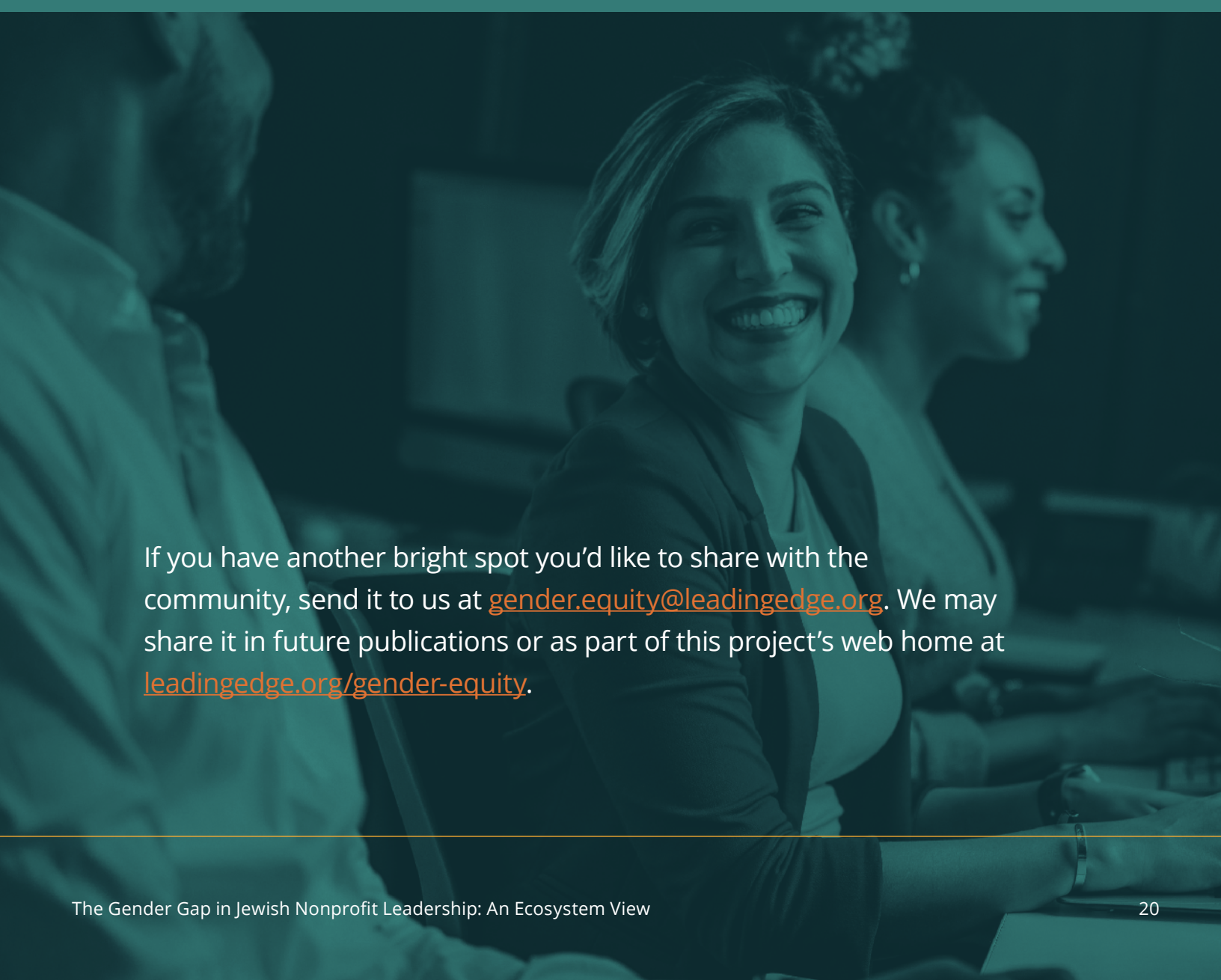
RABBI SHARON BROUS

Founder and Senior Rabbi, IKAR

Bright Spots

Bright spots demonstrate that positive change is possible. They illustrate concrete ways to make things better. They lead by example and build a permission structure for others to follow. They inspire new ideas adjacent to the stories they tell. They bring concepts into human life.

None of these stories constitutes a comprehensive solution for the keystone to which it relates. But all of them point the way in the right direction.



If you have another bright spot you'd like to share with the community, send it to us at gender.equity@leadingedge.org. We may share it in future publications or as part of this project's web home at leadingedge.org/gender-equity.

KEYSTONE OPPORTUNITY #1

Boards and Funders Holding Organizations Accountable and Incentivizing Change

The Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies and LGBTQ Inclusion

Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies have demonstrated how funders can influence nonprofits to make change regarding DEI goals. In 2010, Schusterman announced that they would only consider funding organizations that have formal non-discrimination policies covering both sexual orientation and gender identity and expression explicitly. Schusterman believed that adopting formal non-discrimination policies—and ensuring their implementation—would help achieve two goals: 1) indicate to LGBTQ individuals that the Jewish community is committed to full LGBTQ belonging and equality; and 2) help communal institutions and organizations walk the talk when it comes to creating spaces that are welcoming and inclusive.



KEYSTONE OPPORTUNITY #1

Boards and Funders Holding Organizations Accountable and Incentivizing Change

Schusterman strove to make it a positive and not a punitive experience. They provided support to grantees, working with them where needed to develop their policies. They offered specific templates of inclusion policies along with coaching and consulting to help organizations change and/or implement their policies. By translating this goal into a concrete grant prerequisite and offering supportive resources, Schusterman influenced not only the organizations they funded, but also every organization who viewed their application requirements. They also encouraged other funders to do the same.

As Lynn Schusterman wrote at the time, “This work is vital to the health and vibrancy of the American Jewish future ... [We must] forge a culture in which inclusivity, diversity and equality are paramount, and in which LGBT Jews are embraced as full and vital members of the Jewish family at home, at work and in every aspect of communal life.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

Money, Gender, and Power:

A Guide to Funding with a Gender Lens (Slingshot)



KEYSTONE OPPORTUNITY #2

Talent Strategies for DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion)

Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund's "Job Architecture"

In 2020, the San Francisco Bay Area's Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund (The Federation) created a new framework of "job architecture"—a system for aligning jobs based on the type of work performed. Similar to the idea of salary bands—but operating even more comprehensively—the new system has a uniform, easy-to-understand set of levels that covers job descriptions, job titles, job levels, and compensation. Going forward, it will help the organization develop a template for career paths, criteria for career advancement, and information about how frequently compensation and promotion decisions are made.

KEYSTONE OPPORTUNITY #2

Talent Strategies for DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion)

By putting more structure and regularity into job titles, descriptions, levels, and pay, the Federation has made its personnel system:

- **More fair.** Using clear and predetermined criteria for personnel decisions leaves less room for biases to distort them.
- **More rational.** Creating the system and fitting roles into it forced clear and rigorous thinking about every aspect of the Federation's work.
- **Easier to analyze.** The "job architecture" system will make it easier for Federation management to benchmark its structure and compensation against the market, understand how salaries map onto value created, and track DEI goals and benchmarks.

The Federation leadership hopes that the system may also give its professionals at all levels of the organization **more confidence and trust** that their work is properly understood and valued by management.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

From Ideal Worker to Ideal Workplace: Using Behavioral Design to Create More Equitable Companies (ideas42, Time's Up Foundation)



KEYSTONE OPPORTUNITY #3

Improving Search Committee Processes

Bend the Arc's 2014 CEO Search

In 2014, Bend the Arc needed a new CEO—and it would be their third CEO transition in as many years. In large part because of this recent turnover, the board was eager to explore the possibility of an internal candidate who already knew the organization well. This willingness to consider internal candidates is all too rare—boards and search committees tend to hope for an exotic, unfamiliar, external savior figure, and often prefer candidates with CEO experience, which internal candidates, by definition, lack.

But Bend the Arc wanted stability and institution-specific expertise. The board chair approached Stosh Cotler, Bend the Arc's long-tenured executive vice president, and urged her to put her name forward. Cotler was reticent. She doubted her abilities, questioned her fit for the role, and wondered whether existing staff would support her. But she sought advice, input, and perspective from colleagues and mentors, and the board gave her assurances that if she were selected, they would approve funding for executive coaching and support her in crafting the logistics of the role to fit her life, rather than adopting the work style of her predecessors.

KEYSTONE OPPORTUNITY #3

Improving Search Committee Processes

While Cotler was the board's leading candidate from the beginning, the executive search process wasn't an anointment. She sat for extensive interviews with the board. Cotler recalls that, paradoxically, this diligence reassured her. "They didn't hold back, they didn't coddle me, they didn't make it a rubber-stamp interview, which I deeply appreciate," she recalls. "I wanted to make sure for my own sense of confidence that I wasn't being hired because it was the easy thing to do but because the board believed that I was the best choice."

In June 2021, Bend the Arc announced that Cotler is beginning to transition out of her leadership position at Bend the Arc after seven years of successful executive leadership. As Bend the Arc begins a new chapter, their 2014 CEO search remains an instructive example for them and all organizations about the importance of developing internal leadership potential.

(Adapted from Leading Edge's [*CEO Succession: Case Studies of Excellence from the Jewish Nonprofit Sector*](#).)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

[*CEO Search Committee Guide*](#) (Leading Edge)



KEYSTONE OPPORTUNITY #4

Shifting Perceptions about Leader-Caregivers

On-Site Childcare at Patagonia

For the past 37 years, the outdoor clothing and sportswear company Patagonia has operated an on-site child development center at their California headquarters. Under the leadership of CEO Rose Marcario, they have maintained and expanded this strategy of being a family-friendly workplace. In 2015, for example, they extended on-site childcare to a 400-employee distribution center in Nevada as well.

As Marcario explains, Patagonia calculates that they recoup 91% of the cost of this investment in tax benefits, employee retention, and employee engagement. It's probably not coincidental that 50% of upper management positions at Patagonia are women, a rate that is the exception rather than the rule in high-level corporate management.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

Leveling the Playing Field (Shifra Bronznick, Didi Goldenhar, Marty Linsky)



KEYSTONE OPPORTUNITY #5

The Role of Men

Live the Pledge

Following an article in *eJewish Philanthropy* called [“The Week That All Jewish Women Turned Invisible”](#) and a follow-up called [“Ally Is a Verb,”](#) a group of women and allies created [Live the Pledge](#), a website turning the idea of male allyship into a [set of concrete actions](#) that men can do and amplify:

- Commit to listening and give space to women.
- Cite women’s voices equally.
- Notice when women are interrupted and redirect.
- Give credit where credit is due.
- Decline invitations to serve on all-male panels (manels).
- Bring more women to the table.
- Diversify your media consumption.
- Recommend women for jobs and board positions.
- Ensure gender balance on hiring committees.
- Ensure a safe and comfortable work environment for all.
- Don’t tolerate sexual harassment in the Jewish community.
- End the wage gap.
- Stand up for all women.

More details on each of these actions can be found at <https://www.livethepledge.com/>.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

[“Designing a Bias-Free Organization”](#) (Iris Bohnet)



ENDNOTE

As Bemidbar Rabbah 3:16 teaches us, there are **"70 faces to the Torah,"** In a negative mirror image of that positive vision, our analysis found about **70 faces to the power imbalance in the top rank of leadership** in Jewish institutions.

Portrait from politico.com



We will all be measured going forward by what we do now to step up and keep these issues under sharp focus until dramatic new strides are made."

RUTH MESSINGER

Global Ambassador and Past President, American Jewish World Service

Endnote

But by learning from experts, listening to 1,200 community members, and tapping our collective understandings of how those causes relate to one another, we have identified just five of them that are priority areas to work on, based on their causal relationships to others.

Turning these insights into real progress to change behaviors and systems will take broad efforts from many different people and institutions. These various players may view the issue of gender equity—and other issues related to diversity and inclusion—through many different lenses, and that is a virtue, not a vice. That is “70 faces to the Torah.” This issue—like any complex issue facing the Jewish community—will require many approaches to fully understand and address it. This analysis is our contribution to that effort. We hope that a wide variety of players will align around the goal of moving these five keystones forward, in ways we can’t yet foresee.

For our part, moving forward Leading Edge will focus most intensely on two of these five keystones that are closest to our mission and core programmatic strengths:

- Talent strategies for DEI

- CEO search committees

Endnote

We have already initiated two streams of supplementary research: to understand the contours of this issue in Orthodox Jewish institutions and to investigate key moments and behavioral interventions during the CEO search process. We have also begun exploratory conversations with trusted partners about how to embed progress on all five keystones into every aspect of the work of Leading Edge and other organizations.

We all have a role to play. This effort to expand what leadership means will only work if an expansive group of people and organizations step up and lead it.

Get involved by signing up for updates, resources, and events at leadingedge.org/gender-equity. As we develop additional findings, bright spots, potential action steps, and more, we will share them there. Send us your ideas for any of the above at gender.equity@leadingedge.org.

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The Wexner Foundation

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LEADING EDGE

Alliance for Excellence in Jewish Leadership

Founded in 2014, Leading Edge influences and inspires dramatic change in how Jewish organizations attract, develop, and retain top talent. Leading Edge's flagship program areas focus on supporting and developing executive leaders, strengthening partnerships between volunteer leaders and professionals, and helping organizations improve their workplace culture by becoming leading places to work.

Learn more at leadingedge.org.

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