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Beth Am rabbi, executive go back to school

by Amanda Pazornik
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Rabbi Janet Marder doesn't see herself as a CEO, even though she leads Reform Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills and oversees a majority of its senior-level professionals.

"A synagogue is not a business, nor should it be run based on a corporate mentality," said Marder, who as senior rabbi sees herself primarily as a teacher and spiritual leader. "Still, there is no reason for a synagogue to be run inefficiently."

There also is no reason, she added, why "we can't borrow the most effective tools from the business world and use them to pursue our visions."

Marder and Debbie Coutant, the executive director at Beth Am, were two of the 55 people who attended the inaugural, five-day Kellogg Management Education for Jewish Leaders (KJL) course at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management in suburban Chicago. They were the only attendees from the Bay Area.

The rabbis, with their combined 757 years of experience, executive directors and guests convened Nov. 30 through Dec. 4 at Kellogg, considered one of the world's top graduate business schools. Participants came from throughout the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom.

The invitation-only group of Reform, Conservative and Orthodox rabbis and executive directors received intensive training in topics such as marketing and leadership, fundraising, financial management and conflict resolution.

Also offered were courses in synagogue governance and implementing change, tailored specifically for congregational rabbis.

Participants were selected based on their prominence as leaders within their respective stream of Judaism, and not all attendees were part of a rabbi-director tandem as were Marder and Coutant.

Marder acknowledged that the entire program provided her with relevant and beneficial information, but cited as especially valuable a specific session on values-driven leadership.

It incorporated an "inspiring talk about how a leader uses self-reflection to define the nature in which he or she leads," she said. "The course had far-reaching implications. I learned the importance of taking time to look within and think about, in a compelling way, a vision for a congregation."

Coutant, who manages all operations and development at Beth Am and oversees its annual budget of more than \$3 million, found the sessions that touched on a synagogue's mission statement and vision to be most helpful. Those directives are "a key piece of the way we manage our organization," she said.

The KJL program was developed because of requests from rabbis for a specialized executive program, said the program's academic director.

"In heading up their organizations, Jewish leaders are faced with an increasingly challenging and complex set of responsibilities," said Dinah Jacobs, a pioneer in the field of customer satisfaction and service quality who worked at Citibank for more than 25 years.

"Kellogg Management Education for Jewish Leaders has been established to enable these leaders to acquire and apply cutting-edge management skills," she said. Those skills will help them "more effectively and efficiently head up their organizations and achieve their goals."

Jacobs, whose husband is Donald Jacobs, dean emeritus of the Kellogg School of Management, noted that after KJL launched in May, many Jewish leaders other than rabbis expressed interest. Heads of Jewish day schools, federation leaders and synagogue board members were among those who inquired about being invited, and as a result, a second program is in the works for next year.

Marder said it was particularly helpful to attend this year's program during the economic downturn.

"It's only fair that the spiritual leader be deeply familiar with the underpinnings of our congregation," said Marder, who is deeply involved in fundraising and setting budget priorities. "A rabbi can't be in an ivory tower and pretend these things don't matter."