

Rabbis in the corporate classroom

By Jane Charney

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Dinah Jacobs recognizes that few rabbis choose the rabbinate to become nonprofit managers, yet many “end up being leaders of significant nonprofit organizations.” Far from thinking of the synagogue as a business, a new program at Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management aspires to give rabbis and synagogue executives the tools to manage the not-so-spiritual side of running a shul.

The program, Kellogg Management Education for Jewish Leaders (KJL), held its first on-campus session Nov. 30-Dec. 4 and introduced the corporate take on the principles of marketing, leadership, fundraising, financial management, conflict resolution and crisis management to a class of 55. Among them were 25 current synagogue rabbis, 16 synagogue executive directors, and 14 leaders of rabbinic and synagogue organizations from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Jacobs, a pioneer in the field of customer service and longtime CitiBank executive, created the program with her husband, Donald P. Jacobs, emeritus dean of Kellogg, and Rabbi Efreim Goldberg of the Boca Raton Synagogue.



From left: Rabbi David Steinhardt, the senior rabbi from B'nai Torah Congregation (Boca Raton, Fla.); Rabbi Michael Siegel, the senior rabbi at Anshe Emet Synagogue (East Lakeview, Chicago, Ill.); Dinah Jacobs, KJL academic director; Rabbi Jack Moline, Agudas Achim Congregation (Alexandria, Va.); and Rabbi Mark Diamond, executive vice president of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California.

“Rabbinic and corporate leadership face some of the same issues,” said Rabbi Michael Balinsky, executive vice president of the Chicago Board of Rabbis, who helped recruit participants for the first session and learned alongside them. “Corporations deal with crisis, synagogues deal with crisis. Corporations deal with issues of governance and leadership; so do synagogues. Corporations have to make money; synagogues face issues of fundraising. Corporations have to deal with issues of change and transformation, and the process of effecting change. Synagogues have to deal with change, transformation, and the process of effecting change.”

Experts on corporate thinking imparted strategies to deal with such issues during the four-day on-campus session. The challenge now is to translate these skills, tools and ideas to real-life synagogue situations, Balinsky said.

As rabbis and executives face this challenge, they can rely on each other for help. The cross-denominational nature of the program will also mean that various aspects of Jewish tradition will come into play as participants begin to apply the knowledge. Members of the first class, who are now part of the “Leaders Circle,” have access to a private website, case studies and Kellogg speakers. Local alumni chapters are being created in Chicago, New York City, South Florida, Toronto and London.

Each participant also walked away with a wealth of materials to help them meet the challenge, said program alum Rabbi Michael Siegel, senior rabbi at Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago.

“The present-day model of the rabbi brings together a whole variety of skill sets. And while many of these are learned through experience, some simply need to be taught,” Siegel said. “In our congregation, we will certainly apply the fundraising principles. Issues regarding governance and persuasion within a meeting setting are easily applicable and will only make the institution stronger.”

In addition, participants will work together on several projects. Balinsky and a colleague will look for Jewish texts that deal with issues of leadership, governance and change that can be “in a dialogue with the corporate principles,” he said.

As alums, the participants are also expected to tout the program to others in the Jewish community. Although the program’s first session was geared primarily to rabbis, its offerings will expand to other Jewish community professionals as well as lay leaders, such as board members of synagogues and community organizations.

Ultimately, the goal of the program is to aid Jewish organizations not only to be more efficient, but to understand how to make that all-important leap from mission to action, Jacobs said. She hopes the skills KJL gave participants provide that critical middle component.

The 2009 on-campus session will be held Nov. 29-Dec. 3, 2009.