

Synagogue professionals learn management skills at Kellogg

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 unique 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 second on-campus session Nov. 29-Dec. 3, 2009. The program introduced the corporate take on the principles of marketing, leadership, fundraising, financial management, conflict resolution and crisis management to a class of 67, a 22% increase over the inaugural class. Among them were 36 current synagogue rabbis, 26 synagogue executive directors and five leaders of rabbinic and synagogue organizations from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Interestingly, the 36 synagogues represented by the 2009 KJL cohort have a combined membership total of 32,000 households, representing approximately 85,000 family members who stand to benefit from the professional management skills KJL is imparting.

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.

“Rabbinic and corporate leadership face some of the same issues,” said Rabbi Michael Balinsky, executive vice president of the Chicago Board of Rabbis, who has helped recruit participants and learns 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 five-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 and international nature of the program also means that various aspects of Jewish



The KJL Advisory Board, from left: Rabbi Baruch C. Frydman-Kohl, senior rabbi at Beth Tzedec Congregation (Toronto, ON); Rabbi Andrew C. Shaw, community rabbi at Stanmore and Canons Park United Synagogue and executive director of TRIBE, Young United Synagogue (London, England); Rabbi Peter S. Knobel, senior rabbi at Beth Emet the Free Synagogue (Evanston, IL); and Rabbi Michael Balinsky, executive vice president of the Chicago Board of Rabbis.

tradition come into play as participants begin to apply the knowledge. KJL Colleagues, who are now part of the "Leaders Circle," have access to a private learning website, webinars and Kellogg Alumni Advisors, all on a no-fee-added basis.

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 work together on several projects. Balinsky and Rabbi Richard Camras, of Shomrei Torah Synagogue in West Hills, CA, co-lead the KJL Text project, in which Jewish texts are put in dialogue with the values-based leadership principles studied on campus.

"An important resource is evolving," says Dinah Jacobs, "in which many voices are brought together from all parts of our Jewish community."

Participants now come from all denominations and 18 states as well as beyond the U.S. As alums, they are also expected to tout the program to others in the Jewish community. Although the program's initial sessions were 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 next on-campus session will be held Nov. 14-18, 2010. For more information, contact Dinah Jacobs at dinah-jacobs@kellogg.northwestern.edu or 847.323.5739.