

Mini Makeover Jewish Communal Scenarios

A. The Board Culture (groups 1, 7, 13, 19, 25)

When two new members of a Jewish board resigned after just one year, the board decided to look more closely at its culture. The board meets 9 times a year and follows a traditional agenda: rotating “d’vei Torah” (commentary on Jewish text), staff updates and presentations with policy discussions and approvals. Aside from a board dinner once a year and individual coffees with the board chair, there are few opportunities to get to know each other. The members who resigned were young tech professionals, one Yemenite Israeli, and the other a Biracial Jew. They felt disillusioned by a divisive issue that split the board, frustrated by meetings that felt like a waste of their time and skills, and out of place on a board of older white, Ashkenazi members who all seemed to know each other.

B. The Urban Preschool (groups 2, 8, 14, 20, 26)

Mornings at XXX school are busy with parents and caregivers dropping their kids before rushing off to work. This urban Jewish school is ethnically diverse, with a high percentage of working parents, and about 70% of families that identify Jewishly. Parking is difficult so the school offers an organized drop-off system, with the result that few parents meet each other or congregate at school. Parent volunteerism and fundraising are low, and it’s difficult to get parents to step in to leadership roles. In a parent survey, many reported they’d like to feel more part of the school, and more knowledgeable about the Jewish content their kids are bringing home, while others were satisfied with the “drop-off culture” and the education they are paying for.

C. The Annual Event (groups 3, 9, 15, 21, 27)

This annual gala is a time-honored tradition for a prominent Jewish agency. Roughly 500 people attend each year (many of the same people) and it runs like clockwork. There’s a cocktail reception, followed by a seated dinner with sponsors filling the tables up front, a keynote speaker, a moving video, several awards, and a fundraising pitch. For most attendees, this is the only touchpoint with the agency each year. Lately, the agency’s leadership have begun to wonder whether the event is worth the enormous staff time invested, or whether it might be re-designed to include new people and build greater connection among attendees and with the agency.

D. The Innovative JCC (groups 4, 10, 16, 22, 28)

The JCC has been making some changes and innovations, and a group of long-time members are just not having it. The lobby's received a family-friendly overhaul, the dues and fee structure were revised, the library was turned into a teen lounge, and the café is now offering Indian food to honor the growing population at the center. None of this has gone over well with a group of about 20 seniors who spend every morning at the JCC. Several of them marched into the CEO's office today to complain long and loudly about losing their gathering space and paying extra for other people's pilates classes and children's activities. "We want our JCC back!" they exclaimed.

E. The Welcoming Synagogue (groups 5, 11, 17, 23)

Congregation B'nay Area prides itself on being a friendly synagogue. Board members are trained to welcome congregants and guests at services, name tags are in regular use, and the Rabbi (who is warm and personable) frequently invites people to "introduce yourself to your neighbor" on Shabbat. There are many excellent educational, spiritual and social programs to choose from, but attendance is low, and while people may feel "warmly welcomed," most don't feel connected or invested. Last week, a mixed-race couple preparing for their daughter's bat mitzvah, was asked by a member if the girl is "actually Jewish." The Rabbi is starting to realize that "friendliness" isn't enough.

F. The Hillel Shabbat (groups 6, 12, 18, 24)

Shabbat dinner is a focal point at Hillel, where 300 kids showed up on the first Friday of the semester for free roast chicken, fresh baked challah and a rousing "Kabbalat Shabbat" — the celebration to welcome the day of rest. Most of the student leaders grew up immersed in Jewish camp, youth group and observant families and they are excited to share their love of Judaism with fellow students through song, dance and prayer. But by November, the numbers have dwindled, and a quick check of the sign-up sheets reveals that first-timers aren't coming back, leaving just the core who share similar backgrounds and observance levels. The Hillel president invites a few of the one-timers to coffee and hears the same story: "I'm not Jewish enough, or I'm not a good Jew; I don't know the prayers and I know people can tell I don't belong there."