

Drivers of Engagement

A United Synagogue Board of Management members' attitude survey, 2015

1. In summer 2015 it was decided to look at the younger members of United Synagogue (US) Boards of Management to investigate whether there were any trends in their involvement which could point the way forward to future engagement in US leadership.

2. To this end a simple internet based survey was developed and it was followed up, where possible, with a telephone survey.

3. In the end, 22 Board of Management (BoM) members, from a variety of communities in central London and the suburbs, completed the web based survey and, of those, telephone follow up surveys were taken by 17 members. Sadly, the fact that it was not possible to make contact with some who said that they would be happy to speak, may be indicative of the time poverty of our younger potential leaders. This, in itself, may need further consideration as the US develops. As many of the questions were discursive and open ended, it has only been possible to attempt a broad brush approach to collating the responses. Nevertheless, it has been possible to discover some trends which are worth noting.

4. Whilst the majority of current younger US Board of Management members grew up in United Synagogue communities (as could be predicted) a significantly higher proportion than might have been imagined grew up in smaller, regional communities or, indeed, overseas communities. All had some form of Jewish education, with the proportion going to Jewish schools, either primary or secondary, being significantly higher than their cohort at the time when they were of school age. Perhaps not surprisingly over 95% of respondents with children were currently sending them to Jewish schools or nurseries.

5. Some 75% were members of Jewish Youth groups, with the most popular being Bnei Akiva, FZY and, perhaps surprisingly, the now defunct Jewish Youth Study Group, which had become a part of the US structure. Over half of those who responded assumed local leadership roles in the youth groups, with a few taking on national leadership positions. More than 80% joined JSocs at university but only some 10% took on a leadership role in them. It was to be noted that over 20% were Adam Science Foundation graduates.

6. When asked about their family's synagogue connections, nearly 2/3 had parents who had served on synagogue committees, with almost all of them having been BoM members, too. A number of the respondents noted that their fathers had been chairmen or wardens of their synagogues.

7. When asked what they felt that they got out of their involvement, over 70% said that they liked being involved in the community, with help in decision making and the opportunity to shape the future being also commented on by nearly 50% of those surveyed. When probed further, the hope that they could influence decision making was cited significantly more often than any other comment. Interestingly, the opportunity to get to know other members of the community was the third most cited reason. As could perhaps be imagined, the factors which frustrated them most when trying to do something were, in almost equal measures, Board of Management meetings, communal politics, overcoming the resistance to change, getting others to carry out tasks and the realisation that the real decisions were actually made elsewhere.

8. In response to the question 'what motivated you to take on a community leadership role?', significant majorities said that they had responded to a personal approach but they had already decided that they wanted to 'give back' to their communities. 2/3 wanted to 'drive change', but most did not want to develop their leadership skills, take on leadership roles or push forward a particular project. There was no significant feeling that "no-one else stepped forward" and – perhaps unsurprisingly – the vast majority did not do it because they had more spare time.

9. When pushed further to define the single biggest factor which had led to their involvement, most said that they wanted to do the best for their children, with others citing family tradition, the desire to help out and the new

opportunities offered by the US to women to take on leadership roles (there are currently 7 women chairs of synagogues and there have been as many as 12).

10. As could be imagined, the amount of time spent on leadership roles varied significantly, with new BoM members spending less than 1 hour per week, the majority spending 1-2 hours per week, but a small number spending up to 10 hours a week.

11. When asked what they had gained from their involvement, most noted that they had learned organisational, management and public speaking skills, some 25% said that they had learned about the US and a few cited the chance to meet senior people. Most noted that membership had been a source of personal development. They were also not much involved in other leadership roles within or beyond the Jewish community.

12. Those surveyed felt that the resources provided by the US for new BoM members appear to be lacking. The overwhelming request from those surveyed was for induction training into the structure, function and purpose of the US, their individual shuls and skills training on various management topics. Many suggested a handbook for BoM members and/or a dedicated space on the US website for them to learn about new initiatives and share best practice.

13. Some quotes of value from those surveyed include:

“Volunteer committees are run by hearts not heads”

“There is an inability of Boards of management to make decisions”

“There is often a mismatch between community needs and BoM needs”

“Boards seem to be run on the HIPPO management principle (**highest paid person's opinion**)”

“For Boards of Management to work, they need a defined purpose. They are NOT social groups”

14. **Conclusions**

The most significant drivers of engagement were:

Parental involvement

Jewish schooling

Jewish Youth group membership

Adam Science Foundation training

Opportunities for personal development

Opportunity to make a difference for their children

What the US could do better:

Induction training

Dedicated and secure US website pages

A handbook for BoM members

Skills training (public speaking, chairing meetings etc)

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