

Key Dimensions of Healthy Partnerships

by Terry Bookman and William Kahn

At the core of healthy partnerships between lay leaders, clergy, and staff is a set of processes that characterize their attitudes and behaviors in relation with one another. These processes show up in daily interactions—in how people treat and work with one another, how they approach one another, how they react to one another. With enough repetition, these processes become ingrained to the point that people become accustomed to working with one another in useful, healthy ways; indeed, with enough repetition, congregations form cultures that sanction such processes as normal, as expected, as simply the way things ought to be done. We briefly describe six interrelated types of healthy processes here.

Transparency. The foundation of a healthy partnership is a clearly shared understanding of how the partnership itself operates. Lay leaders and professional staff each need to understand where authority for particular decisions is located and the nature of their own and others' tasks and roles and how they relate to their shared mission. Such transparency in turn enables people to be consistent and reliable with one another.

Openness. People being open to one another is a mark of healthy partnerships. Openness, in this context, means people considering others as potential helpmates, as potential partners, rather than as people who are unable to contribute or to partner. Lay leaders and professional staff work with one another far more effectively when they have mutual respect and believe that the other can make real contributions. Certain conditions make those contributions likely: a sense of humility (others may know things that we do not), benefit of the doubt (others have good intentions), trust (others have our interests at heart), and appropriate boundaries (others maintain confidences and communicate directly and honestly).

Support. Supportive relationships involve a mixture of different elements. People are, first and foremost, available to and for one another: they make time to talk, they listen well, they remain with rather than avoid or rush one another, they challenge one another respectfully, and they show one another warmth. They also come to an understanding and appreciation of one another; staff members appreciate the time and energy put in by lay leaders who in turn appreciate the dedication of the professional staff. Support also comes in the form of offering salient information, feedback, insights, and interpretations that enable others to reflect on and make sense of situations that they find confusing or troubling. Lay leaders and professional staff can help one another a great deal simply by sitting with and trying to help one another understand situations and potential courses of action. They can also help protect each other as the various politics of the congregation swirl around them and threaten to destabilize their work and their relationships.

Managing Differences. Healthy partnerships are marked by differences—in perspectives, agendas, ideas, beliefs, and experiences. Ideally, those differences are worked with rather than suppressed or denied. Managing differences well means engaging them directly. Lay leaders and professional staff identify the places where they agree and those where they disagree and then

explore the issues in light of their shared interests and goals. Resolving differences is foremost a matter of getting agreement on the primary objective of any particular program or project, the criteria by which progress on that objective will be determined, and then, finally, the ways in which that objective will be pursued. This last issue is most often the sticking point: How will we go about getting this thing done? People who navigate those places well focus on as much objective data as they can in resolving their differences. They do so without creating casualties.

Productivity. Healthy relationships are productive: people get things done in partnership with one another. Lay leaders and professional staff create effective relationships when they focus on the tasks before them. They divide the labor, based on a shared understanding of what they need to do and how they need to work together and separately. They collaborate effectively, sharing information and attacking problems early and often. They create achievable objectives that are neither so difficult that they are unattainable nor so simple that they pose little challenge or satisfaction. They go after and celebrate their successes. And they enjoy the process of working with one another. Productive partnerships occur in the context of a culture of ongoing regard, in which each individual is celebrated as b'tzelem Elohim (an image of God) doing God's work in this world.

Capacity for Learning. Partnerships remain strong and healthy when those involved within them keep learning. In this regard, we mean various kinds of learning. People need to learn the various things that enable them to make real contributions. Lay leaders must keep learning about the congregation, its members, and one another to continue to run effective committees and create thoughtful board policies. Professional staff must keep learning about their areas of expertise, about the interests of the congregants, and about the effectiveness of their work to keep improving upon their programs. People also need to learn about their partnerships and discover (and discover again) what is working well and not so well and how their work with others might be improved upon. Last, but certainly not least, all of us need to learn torah lishmah (study for its own sake, without hope for reward) to deepen our sense of who we are and about the tradition that sustains us on our individual journeys. It is this capacity for learning—for reflection, dialogue, and absorption of lessons—that enables partnerships to be resilient, that is, to change and grow in the face of the inevitable peaks and valleys of their evolution.

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