

BLUE SKY INNOVATION



Religious Texts and Management Gurus: A Study of Jewish Leadership

Yes, there is such a thing as Jewish leadership. Spertus Institute President and CEO Hal M. Lewis explains in this excerpt from a Q&A with journalist Kate MacArthur for the *Chicago Tribune's* Blue Sky, an online gathering place for analysis and events related to innovation and entrepreneurship.

We often think of leadership tenets like collaboration and humility as being created by management gurus like Jim “Good to Great” Collins and the late Peter Drucker. Yet many of those concepts are born or adapted from centuries-old lessons.

In 2012, the Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership teamed with Northwestern University’s School of Professional Studies to create a Certificate in Jewish Leadership to fill a growing need for leaders of Jewish organizations — but with lessons that are also applicable to non-Jews. The \$2,500, four-course program holds classes over four months at both campuses.



Hal M. Lewis, President and CEO of Spertus Institute, explains what Jewish leadership is and what the Bible and Peter Drucker have in common.

Q. What exactly is “Jewish leadership?”

A. When I use that term, I refer to the millennia worth of sacred sources like the Bible and the Talmud, and classical sources like commentary and legal and biblical interpretations that today are part of the classical Jewish sources.

Those sources say leadership is not about rank or title or your position in the organizational chart. Leadership is about how you behave. From that emerges a whole set of cascading conclusions.

That means leadership is not limited to an exclusive group. It means anybody who can be taught is capable of manifesting leadership. That also means leadership is not unique to men, which was part of the Western teachings of leadership in the 70’s and 80’s.

Q. What are some of the key topics you explore?

A. Many of the classical sources contain insights and teachings, including humility in leadership, power sharing, the use and abuse of power, and succession planning.

It begins with a fundamental willingness to say you cannot

solve 21st century problems with 20th century organizations or leadership models. It means that the old approach of command-and-control, top-down style leadership is a thing of the past.

I spend a lot of time talking about the virtues of power sharing versus power hoarding. We are training a group of leaders who understand—to paraphrase the great Peter Drucker—that the leader today is not necessarily the expert, but the convener of experts.

A third example is succession planning, something [that is] very important in classical Jewish sources. From the moment that Moses in the Bible says to God that, “we need a successor,” and that ends up being Joshua, the emphasis is the role of a leader is to create an organization that outlives them. That brings this commitment to succession planning and leadership training at every level of the organization.

Nothing is a bigger indictment of a leader in Jewish sources and best practices than if that person says, “When I die or move to Florida, the organization is going to crumble.” People actually say that as if it’s a reflection of their positive leadership. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Q. How have you applied power sharing in your own experience as a leader?

A. I had been at Spertus as a faculty member and administrator for more than 13 years. But seven-and-a-half years ago, the board approached me to assume the presidency of Spertus at quite a troubled time.

We had built a new building as the recession was kicking in. People weren’t giving as much in philanthropic giving. We weren’t earning as much in our endowments. And we needed some dramatic and significant changes. There were complicated financial challenges and real estate matters.

I said to the board that I couldn’t do this by myself. It does not hurt my feelings to say that my understanding of complex financial arrangements is limited, but that my board and colleagues at the Jewish Federation have that expertise, and we amassed a team to do that.

There is no way that any single individual, no matter how talented, would know enough, or have context enough, to pull this off. I believe that leadership is like lighting a candle from another candle.

[This process] brought us to a time [today] where we can say we are not facing any existential financial threat and that Spertus Institute is solid.

January 12, 2016

For more about the Certificate in Jewish Leadership and other Spertus Institute leadership programs, visit spertus.edu/certificate