

“Vision 2020: Leading British Jewry into the Future” 9 March 2014

Presentation by Margaret Harris to Board of Deputies Leadership Conference

Leading British Jewry: Can we take lessons from Social Research?

I am delighted to have been invited to participate today. It is great that we are allowing ourselves head space to think about the topic of ‘leading British Jewry’. Too often we have not only assumed that we know what is involved in leading British Jewry but we have also assumed that there is no debate to be had. Let’s just get on with it, we say, because, in the words of Rabbi Tarfon, “the day is short and the work is great”.

But what does it mean to ‘just get on with it’ when you have a leadership responsibility? Is it analogous to building a house, say, where we know well that special materials and expertise are essential? Or is the leadership task more analogous to bringing up a child perhaps, where we assume, as a society, that most people can get by with a hefty dose of common sense and good will, a smattering of life experience and just occasional outside advice when specific problems arise?

Certainly we can see some similarities between our approach to child rearing and the way we as a Jewish community generally ‘do’ leadership. Of course some of our valued paid staff have specialist expertise in Jewish matters or leadership matters. But mostly we assume that those who come forward to lead our community, will behave honourably and sensibly and somehow be in possession of sufficient life experience, education and common sense to get the job done without too many mistakes. Today I want to suggest that, in addition to all these important qualities, our leaders – and therefore we ourselves as a community - might benefit as well from drawing on a smattering of evidence-based knowledge from accumulated social research.

As we have already heard this morning from Dr Jon Boyd and Professor Cesarani, there is much to be gained from an understanding of our past history as British Jews. And the regular demographic and attitudinal surveys which we as a community have invested in, can tell us much about trends and where the shoe is pinching in terms of needs and demands for the future. We really do need this kind of historical awareness and statistically valid data about ourselves. But that is not the only kind of knowledge we need to help us do leadership well. We should also consider adapting for our own use some of the findings of social research conducted in and about the wider community - in the UK and elsewhere. I would like this morning to give you just a few examples of areas of knowledge that I know from my own experience as a practice-focused researcher can be useful for leaders of our communal organizations – our charities, philanthropic foundations, volunteering organizations, synagogues and representative bodies.

We might begin in fact with the very idea of leadership. It is often used in the context of business and enterprise. But research tells us that there can be more to leadership than good ideas and making the books balance. Research has shown that leadership can be thought about – and enacted - in a number of different ways so we might need to make some choices about the kinds of leaders we want or need. Leadership can be seen:

- as a form of power – the ability to get people to do what you want them to do;
- as an obligation to form mission statements and set goals;
- as a route to ensuring consensus or at least minimising conflict;
- as transformative and visionary; or
- as a means of providing moral guidance.

Again, the authority which leaders enjoy may arise from:

- their personal charisma;
- their wealth;
- their wisdom;
- traditional values; or
- legal principles.

Research also reveals a variety of views about what makes ‘good’ leaders. Are they ‘born’? Are they products of particular circumstances or crises? Are they driven by passions for a cause? Or are they simply people who know how to adapt to circumstances and get tasks done?

Research also tells us quite a bit about how power and ambition can corrupt even the most promising of leaders; inducing them to operate within self-perpetuating oligarchies, to exclude those who they see as potential rivals, and to focus on structure and process rather than mission and goals.

Perhaps we could draw on the insights and choices suggested by research on leadership when we are thinking about difficult community questions such as raising voluntary funds; recruiting to top jobs; possible organisational mergers; securing succession; and appointing paid staff to implement the decisions of voluntary leaders? At the very least, the research findings on leadership could help us think ‘out of the box’; that is, beyond our well established ways of doing things as a community. There is usable knowledge out there which, as a community, we could draw on to guide us in the leadership task for the future. .

The body of research-based knowledge about leadership is just one tiny corner of a bigger field of academic knowledge which is often referred to as 'organisational theory', 'organisational behaviour' or 'OB'. That field too could be helpful for us.

Whenever I come across, as I often do, communal leaders – paid staff, trustees and volunteers – battling with the practical and ethical challenges of their allocated roles, I feel frustrated about the fact that there are so many research-based ideas about running organisations which could be helpful tools for them on a day to day basis – if only they knew about them! These are often ideas which have been widely shared between academics but which those same academics have made little effort to disseminate to the people who could most benefit from them – practitioners actually doing the running of organisations. Topics here on which we could draw for the benefit of our own communal leadership include, for example, how to implement change in contexts where people are doing what they do in a voluntary capacity and cannot be forced or bullied into compliance. Research offers a number of useful ideas for thinking about the perennial challenge of implementing organizational change such as:

- incremental and planned approaches; and
- genuine consultation with those in receipt of services and other so-called 'organisational stakeholders'.

Another topic on which earlier research on OB could be helpful for leaders relates to questions around organisational structure – how we build and run our communal organisations. Most people in contemporary society have some instinctive grasp of the working of 'bureaucratic hierarchy', an idea with its intellectual roots in advice given by Jethro to Moses when the latter was trying to do too much himself. In today's language, Moses was reluctant to delegate his responsibilities. Jethro told him how to construct a hierarchy which would spread the workload but also ensure that final accountability for work done rested with Moses himself.

For a long time, this model of bureaucratic hierarchy was pretty much the only organisational structural model around. Firms, corporations and armies and even charities adopted it as a matter of course. But more recent research has suggested alternative ways of structuring organisations -- ways of getting work done without hierarchy or by using variations on the basic hierarchical model. These include:

- team working between people who enjoy equal organisational authority;
- collective ownership structures;
- 'flat' horizontal relationships between roles;

- member-appointed leaders answerable to an electorate;
- alliances between complementary organisations; and
- franchise systems replacing strict headquarters/local relationships.

These models might merit further exploration by communal leaders in the face of proliferating layers of bureaucracy which these days go alongside dwindling resources to pay staff and dwindling numbers of regular volunteers.

Within the vast body of knowledge about organisational behaviour, there is now a more specialist body of knowledge which focuses on charities, community associations and other kinds of non-governmental, non-business organisations – how they can and do run themselves and how they differ from other kinds of organisations. Here there is a potential intellectual treasure chest for the leaders of our communal organisations because, of course, our so-called Jewish ‘community’ in fact comprises hundreds of charities and other kinds of non-profit, voluntary and community groupings. We are part of the so-called voluntary sector and we should be drawing on this specialist body of knowledge too.

In addition to knowledge about fundraising and funding where perhaps we are not so short on specialist expertise, the field of voluntary sector organisation encompasses findings about:

- how to make a success of collaborations and mergers;
- dealing with the ‘commissioning of services’ by local governments;
- being effective advocates; and
- developing appropriate governance structures - boards, councils, trustees and so on.

Research on governing bodies tells us about:

- the different ways in which they can be set up;
- different kinds of relationships between trustees and paid staff; and
- different roles for governing bodies.

This knowledge goes well beyond the legal principles set down by charity law and extends to knowledge about what does and does not work in practice. Again, this kind of practice-focused knowledge can expand the range of possible solutions we consider when we are responding to real-world dilemmas. We know the old ways are not always best but sometimes we need practical suggestions about new ways of doing things which might work better for us. Research findings can often provide evidence that moves us beyond gut instincts and taken for granted assumptions.

There is also a substantial body of research about volunteers:

- what motivates them,
- how to recruit them,
- how to keep them once they are recruited,
- how to chunk up tasks so that volunteers find them attractive,
- how to manage and supervise volunteers, and
- how to match the needs of volunteers with the needs of organisations so that tasks get done competently.

The 2012 Olympics gave us a shining example of what can be achieved when volunteer recruiters do take account of the lessons provided by earlier research on motivation and rewards for volunteers. 80,000 volunteers did a collective job which was widely admired across the world. As my own research has shown, the success was in large part due to the fact that, behind the scenes, the volunteering effort was meticulously and sensitively organised, taking full account of research findings on good practice in volunteer involvement.

Another insight from voluntary sector research which we as a community can benefit from is the advisability of looking at communal and voluntary organizations not as self-contained 'black boxes' but as necessarily operating within a broader context. In our case that broader context includes not only other Jewish organisations and other voluntary organisations but also British public policy. Organizational problems which may appear at first glance to be the concern of a single organisation, cannot be adequately responded to without an understanding of the public policy environment. Our leaders need to constantly keep aware of major trends in public policy which affect not only individuals in the community but also what our communal organisations may or may not do and the public expectations placed upon them. They need to be aware of policy trends in matters such as:

- quality of social care;
- delivery of welfare services;
- faith schools;
- tolerance of cultural difference;
- charity law; and
- the appropriate relationship between governmental agencies and voluntary organisations.

The rather wild talk by politicians about 'Big Society' which flourished briefly and has now mysteriously died away is a good example of where we could have benefited from some specialist policy research - not only analysis of what was meant by the phrase but also of how realistic and enduring were the aspirations embedded in the idea. A similar point applies at the moment to

governmental statements about 'welfare dependency'. Are we really facing a major change after more than half a century to public policies on poverty, unemployment and disability? And what are the implications for our own obligations to our own community? Careful monitoring of public policy trends can help us to distinguish bluster from truly new directions which we as a community must respond to, whether we like the new trends or not.

As well as drawing on generic research about voluntary organisations, we could learn too from the growing body of research about religion-based organisations. They are more frequently called 'faith based' organisations but that Christian-sounding term should not deflect us from drawing lessons from the research.

One important insight from that body of research is about the special nature of the goal-setting task in a religion-based organisation. Businesses, social enterprises and even charities are free to take a broad scan of possibilities when making strategic decisions about their future aims. But leaders of a faith organisation need to be constantly aware of what I have termed in my own writing 'low goal ceilings'. Leaders have to work within fixed institutional goals which – because they are part of a religious tradition – cannot be changed or even debated. In fact leaders become guardians of these religious principles and have to maintain a delicate balance between maintaining the religious core and running a responsive and effective organisation – whether it is a synagogue, a social care provider or a small community association.

Religious principles can also make other organizational tasks especially challenging for leaders in faith based groups. Difficult questions can arise about

- who has the authority to direct whom;
- who is to be held to account when things go wrong;
- what can and should be delegated to committees and working groups; and
- who can speak to the media.

It can be tempting in faith organisations to think that these kinds of questions can be settled by reference to religious prescription. Often this concentrates broad powers on clergy and rabbis – powers to make decisions on matters which are not really 'religious' in any sense. Yet what is assumed to be religious prescription may be no more than 'custom and practice' which has somehow gained a sacred aura. And even where there is clear religious guidance, there is often scope for rethinking how things have always been done so that adaptation to contemporary circumstances can be made.

So far I have mentioned a number of bodies of research on which our leaders might draw to inform their practice and to widen the range of ideas for solving practical challenges: research on leadership, on organizational behaviour, on voluntary sector organisations and on faith based organisations. There are many more. Let me just mention three in closing.

We have a rich body of research literature on the psychology of group behaviour including families. It can throw light on some of the more puzzling aspects of phenomena we observe in the context of synagogues, social care provision, board discussions and, indeed, competition for leadership positions.

Then we have the body of research about how we can build bridges across religious and ethnic divides in the context of an increasingly diverse society where looking only inwards to our own community needs is not a good recipe for survival. We can learn from research on multi-cultural encounters and reconciliation about how we can live better with people who are different from ourselves and we can learn too how to deal with our own internal communal differences of opinion over the future of Israel and the future directions for the British Jewish community – or ‘British Jewish community of communities’ as it may more appropriately be titled..

Finally, I would suggest that we have much to learn from research on diversity and equality in the work place. As a community we are still remarkably reluctant to take a look at the research which tells us about how to increase workplace opportunities for women and minorities including those with disabilities. A small community like ours cannot afford to waste resources of money, time and expertise. But we do all the same.

I have focused this morning on giving a flavour of the areas of social research from which our communal leaders might draw knowledge and inspiration for the future. I think we need a new approach to leadership which seeks out what is already known so that we do not re-invent wheels or accept without critical examination the same old way of doing things.

My argument leaves us of course with some questions for further discussion. Most obviously, we need to think about efficient and effective ways to draw down the available social research knowledge for our own benefit. How can we take what we need without drowning in an overload of knowledge? We are also challenged to learn how to debate new ideas without denigrating each other or falling out. We need to find ways to take the best from secular research knowledge and use it to inspire our future leaders.

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