

ON FINDING A TEACHER DARRELL D. FRIEDMAN AS MENTOR

BY MARC B. TERRILL

President, THE ASSOCIATED: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore

“Find yourself a teacher,” the Talmud says; and the wisdom of that advice is plain to anyone who has tried to master a new field of knowledge or acquire a new set of skills. Yet, whether we hunger for Torah or secular learning, most of us count ourselves fortunate to have found even one great teacher — one who will not only instruct us but who will also guide and inspire and ultimately change our lives.

I have been lucky, for I found my teacher. Or perhaps I should say that my teacher found me. I was not consciously looking for a mentor when I came to THE ASSOCIATED: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore in 1989 as a young Assistant Campaign Director. Aside from a desire to serve the Jewish people as a community professional, my goals were not yet sufficiently focused nor my ambitions sufficiently formed for me to seek a personal working partnership with the president of our federation himself.

Rather, it was Darrell D. Friedman who reached out to me. It was Darrell who saw my potential and who determined to nurture it, to develop it, and to reveal it fully to me. Darrell was my role model, who taught through example; my instructor, who shared what he knew; my coach, who both criticized and encouraged me; and my trusted friend.

THE MENTOR

THE ASSOCIATED has no specific mentoring policy in place, and my relationship with Darrell did not spring from a formal program. Rather, it sprang from Darrell’s natural instincts and professional priorities. It has been said that the sign of the consummate professional is his or her willingness to

counsel and guide the neophyte; and in this respect, Darrell has been an exemplar.

Professional development at all levels has been the hallmark of Darrell’s career in Baltimore. He has devoted unlimited attention and energy to seeing that the Jewish community attracts — and sends forth — the best and brightest Jewish youth to community service. He takes personal responsibility for ensuring that the next generation of Jewish communal leadership is the most knowledgeable, talented, and visionary in Jewish history. Nor is this simply my personal view of Darrell: in 2002, THE ASSOCIATED vastly expanded and upgraded its existing professional education program, the Baltimore Institute for Jewish Communal Service, and renamed it in honor of Darrell Friedman.

The goal of enhancing professional training is hardly unusual; indeed, one can scarcely imagine a Jewish leader today who would not advocate it. What makes Darrell’s approach unique — indeed, what commends it to an audience beyond Baltimore — is that Darrell saw *professional development as an integral aspect of the federation’s strategic plan*. In mentoring me and in nurturing others, Darrell was not only displaying his personal and professional generosity but he was also advancing the mission of THE ASSOCIATED and the Baltimore Jewish community.

There were other considerations, in addition to Darrell’s natural instinct to share his knowledge. I believe Darrell always had the question of succession in the back of his mind. He knew that he would not remain at THE ASSOCIATED forever, and he believed it was not enough to compile a distinguished record for himself. He meant to create a legacy, training the next generation of leaders while ensuring the

smoothest possible transition to the new styles and new ideas that would inevitably result.

Furthermore, Darrell understands, as great teachers always do, that it is interpersonal relationships that hold an organization together and account for its success. What matters in the end are teamwork, mutual respect, and a sense of common cause. These behaviors cannot be learned in a classroom or prescribed by management; they must be modeled by leaders who are genuinely committed to their staff.

In the end, mentoring is not merely a management technique or skill-building process, nor is it simply friendship. It is wise, nurturing support that creates a framework and a context within which young professionals can realize their full potential.

THE MENTEE

Successful mentorship is a two-way street. The mentee is not simply an empty vessel waiting to be filled with knowledge by a master teacher. The mentee must be willing to learn and to change, to accept criticism, and to experiment and grow. These tasks are not as easy as they appear, and they require tremendous commitment.

I came to the process with an open mind and a willing disposition. Having served as a Big Brother for several years in Baltimore's Jewish Big Brother and Big Sister League, I knew the value of role models in anyone's life. However, I was accustomed to being the role model myself—of providing guidance and support to a younger person—and now the situation was reversed.

As a mentee, I soon discovered that I would benefit from the relationship only to the extent that I was willing to be brutally honest with myself. That meant more than just accepting the constructive criticism I received from my mentor. It meant I had to be willing to expose my weaknesses to myself and to others, to examine and reexamine my core convictions and values, and to analyze as thoroughly and objectively as possible the reasons for my successes and failures.

For me, the rewards were both tangible and intangible. Certainly, I enhanced my knowledge and skills to an extent that would never have been possible through classroom study alone. Much of what I learned from Darrell Friedman I might have learned eventually through experience, but it would have taken many years. Most important, as a mentee I developed a sharper focus on my community's needs and expectations and on what was required to grow professionally within the organization. I gained a more nuanced understanding of the "culture" of THE ASSOCIATED and the Baltimore Jewish community it serves.

Ultimately, my job was not to become a professional clone of my mentor or of anyone else. It was to use my mentor as a sounding board and — to mix metaphors — as a resource for getting to know myself better, for formulating my own goals, and for developing my own way of operating.

SUCCESSFUL MENTORING

What made my mentoring relationship with Darrell Friedman so successful? What enabled me to learn and grow professionally and ultimately to follow in Darrell's footsteps as president of THE ASSOCIATED?

The answer to those questions is that the mentoring process that I went through with Darrell contained an ideal balance of critical elements. As I noted, there was no formal mentoring program in place during Darrell's tenure at THE ASSOCIATED. Nevertheless, my experience suggests that any mentor-mentee program, whether formal or informal, ought to include the following elements:

- **Risk-Taking:** This is just another term for "freedom to fail." Obviously, neither the organization nor the individual is going to benefit if the mentee makes nothing but mistakes or, worse yet, makes the same mistakes over and over. However, the best mentorships enable the mentee to experiment with new ideas without fear of

professional consequences if something goes wrong.

It is not that the mentee must never experience fear. Apprehension is a natural companion to change and experimentation. However, the mentee must be able to face fear and still act—and that requires an acceptance of risk-taking by both parties.

By the same token, a good mentor must be willing to let the mentee fail. It is tempting for the mentor to explain why the mentee's new idea won't work, can't work, and has never worked in the past. This is, after all, the voice of experience, which the mentee seeks. However, the mentor must also encourage the mentee to explore the path ahead for him- or herself and even to fall into the occasional pot-hole. In this situation, the good mentor will not crow, "I told you so!" He or she will simply offer a supporting hand up.

Both failure and success are powerful teachers, and there should be room for both in any good mentoring relationship.

- **A safety zone:** If mentees must be allowed to take risks, they must also have a place where they can "jump off the carousel" and view the situation from the balcony. Mentors should be instrumental in creating both physical and psychological safe spaces. Just like action and experimentation, reflection and appraisal require their own special arenas.
- **Honesty:** It bears repeating: mentors and mentees must be completely honest with each other and with themselves. That mentorship is doomed if the participants worry excessively about hurt feelings or wounded pride. I have heard of mentors who see themselves as coaches, building their mentees' self-esteem through constant praise. I do not subscribe to that view. Genuine growth derives from honesty and truth.
- **Confidentiality:** The willingness of both parties to speak and act honestly, to expose their weaknesses, and to resolve problems depends on absolute confidenti-

ality. It is the foundation of the entire mentor-mentee relationship. Enough said.

- **Context:** A mentor-mentee relationship may be focused entirely on the advancement of one person's career. In contrast, the relationship I enjoyed with Darrell Friedman took place in a much broader context, and I believe it was all the more valuable for that perspective. Darrell's mentorship was for him not simply a matter of finding a protégé to carry his program forward at some future date, nor was it merely about his regard and friendship for one individual. Rather, Darrell linked his mentorship to THE ASSOCIATED'S overall strategic objectives. He saw his assistance to me as a way to advance THE ASSOCIATED'S mission of service to the local and international Jewish community. In this way Darrell not only trained me in specific management skills but he also broadened and deepened my perspective and infused my work, and his, with new levels of meaning.

An ideal mentor-mentee relationship is one that benefits not one person or two, but the entire organization — the entire community, perhaps — in which it takes place.

- **Personal relationships:** If you hang around a teacher's lounge in any given high school on any given day, it will not be long before you hear snatches of the old argument about an educator's obligations: do we teach the subject matter or do we teach the child? In other words, is learning a process of mastering specific intellectual skills, or is it a process of growth that affects every aspect of the student's life?

I would not offer myself as an expert witness before a panel of professional high-school teachers, but as a grateful mentee, I come down very strongly on the side of educating the whole person. Mentors need not be their mentees' personal

friends—although it certainly doesn't hurt if they are— but they should be prepared to focus on everything that affects the mentees' professional growth. If a mentor is prepared to critique a mentee's business plan, he or she must be equally prepared to critique, for example, a mentee's "body language" during a meeting or a mentee's personality quirks that may be interfering with his or her effectiveness.

Put succinctly, a successful mentor-mentee relationship crosses job boundaries. In time, it may cross all the way into the realm of enduring, lifelong friendship.

- **Mutuality:** The picture of mentorship should not be that of a student sitting at a master's knee. Particularly at the outset of a mentoring relationship, there is substantial imbalance in the parties' respective knowledge, stature, and authority. However, mentoring is ideally a joint venture in which responsibility for teaching and learning is shared. And as the relationship matures over time, it may become a life-long exchange.

The mentor should be as willing as the mentee to share his or her personal experiences and insights and to subject them to honest critique. A mentor is not some sort of guru who shows the mentee the right way to do things. A mentor also shares his or her experiences of failure and disappointment. As much as the mentee, the mentor should be able to gain new insights from the mentee's experiences and development.

- **Bridge-building:** One of the most valuable assets I gained from working closely with Darrell Friedman was the introductions he provided to people and organizations I might otherwise have overlooked or been ill prepared to approach. Simply put, Darrell was a bridge-builder who continually forged relationships between Baltimore's Jewish and general communities. As his

mentee, I was able to walk over those bridges, which are now proving so important to me in my capacity as president of THE ASSOCIATED. I certainly intend to continue this important outreach during my own tenure, and I am immensely grateful to Darrell for the time we spent together, working closely with individuals as diverse as the archbishop of the Catholic Diocese of Baltimore and the president and leadership of The Johns Hopkins University.

LOOKING AHEAD

To every young Jewish communal professional, I would repeat, find yourself a teacher. Ideally, find one who embodies as many as possible of the principles of outstanding mentorship delineated in this article. To every professional leader of a Jewish communal organization I would say, Become a teacher. Mentor a young professional. Doing so will not only benefit your mentee but will also advance your organization and will yield immeasurable personal benefits as well.

At the same time, not every potential role model is a natural mentor, as Darrell Friedman is. So as a corollary, I would urge Jewish communal organizations to investigate the possibility of putting formal mentorship programs in place, creating specific guidelines and goals, and providing effective training and evaluation for mentors and mentees alike.

Such a program is a possibility I would like to explore at THE ASSOCIATED. At the very least, I will continue to urge established professionals to seek out compatible newcomers to teach them specific skills and approaches to their work and to act as a sounding board for their ideas.

The benefits of mentoring, whether undertaken informally, as in my case, or formally, through a carefully designed program, are unmistakable. Mentoring is a powerful tool in attracting and retaining the best talent for

an organization. It reduces turnover costs while improving productivity and morale. It offers an effective way of ensuring that a community's professional leadership is as well informed, skilled, and innovative as possible. It provides for smooth transitions and successions at appropriate times. And if undertaken properly, it is an important means of fulfilling an organization's mission and objectives.

A formal, structured program cannot be established overnight. First, the organization

must carefully assess its needs and articulate its goals, gain the support of board members and other lay and professional leadership, establish specific procedures and expectations, and provide reliable measures of success. However, informal, spontaneous mentoring relationships can be established as quickly as two people can connect on common professional ground.

I urge my fellow Jewish communal professionals to begin making those connections today.

UJA Federation
of Greater Toronto
extends best wishes to
Darrell
and appreciation for
his partnership over
the years.



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