CASE STUDY

AMERICAN JEWISH WORLD SERVICE
Ruth Messinger took over the reins as CEO of American Jewish World Service (AJWS), a Jewish nonprofit focused on international development, human rights, and global justice, in 1998, shortly after losing a race to become New York City’s mayor to incumbent Rudy Giuliani. By June 2013, she was at the power center of her career, having grown AJWS into an internationally recognized, $40-million-a-year grant-giving organization that employed over 140 people.

Her accomplishments at AJWS were numerous. In the immediate aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, which would eventually claim over 200,000 lives, Messinger had the foresight to see that the event would push international development into the forefront of Jewish consciousness. In the preceding years, she prepared AJWS to respond to international crises, so AJWS’ swift response brought thousands of new donors into the fold. She stewarded the organization through the 2008 financial crisis, managing to increase the reach and impact of AJWS’ national and international work. A gifted public speaker, she worked tirelessly to grow financial and political support for the organization’s mission.

“She really doesn’t sleep,” says longtime AJWS board member Marty Friedman. “She can work over 100 hours a week and still be the sharpest person in the room.” Even though Messinger wasn’t the founder of AJWS, Friedman recalls, she had become so deeply intertwined with the organization’s identity that staff, board members, and other stakeholders had difficulty imagining AJWS without her at the helm.

By 2013, AJWS had matured from a fast-growing upstart to a more stable, established incumbent. “We were 28 years old,” Friedman says. “Under Messinger we had grown up. We weren’t the new kid on the block anymore.” This period of growth marked an accomplishment for Messinger that eludes most
chief executives. Not only was AJWS financially healthy, but she had also built an exceptional partnership with her strong and experienced number two, Robert Bank, whom she had brought into the organization as executive vice president in 2009 to build out a strategic plan that more deeply focused on the organization’s internal operations and programmatic impact. The board was engaged, participating in the strategic plan and completing internal work to sharpen its governance practices. Messinger herself had recently received several recognitions and awards, including being named one of the 50 most influential Jews in America by the Forward.

So when the board formed a task force in spring 2013 to discuss what Harvard Business Review has called “the last act of the great CEO,” everything was in place for Messinger to transition her power from a position of strength. There was just one problem: Messinger had no intention of ever stepping down.

“I used to tell donors who inquired about my plans that the only way I was going to leave my office was feet first,” Messinger recalls. “It’s a punchline, but I wasn’t joking.”

Experience and tenure are important assets for chief executives, but there’s always the danger that great CEOs will overstay their welcome. Researchers have found that—among CEOs of large public companies—advanced age appears to be negatively related to firm value and operating performance. For that reason, a majority of firms in the S&P 1500 have policies in place that mandate the retirement of their CEOs at age 65, including corporate powerhouses such as General Electric, Altria, ExxonMobil, and Intel. But executives who have remained successful late into life—such as Les Wexner, the 81-year-old CEO of L. Brands, and Warren Buffett, the 88-year-old CEO of Berkshire Hathaway—prove that age isn’t always a barrier to value creation.

In 2013, Messinger was 73 years old, but—still vital—she was closed off to the possibility of leaving her job. What followed was a three-year transition period that holds lessons for organizations facing the prospect of replacing a charismatic, forceful, long-serving chief executive.

In this particular instance, time would prove to be a common theme of how AJWS eventually pulled off a successful transition. Messinger needed time to come to terms with her departure; AJWS’ board needed time to develop the profile of the successor they were looking for; and Robert Bank—the board’s eventual choice—needed time to garner support from both Messinger and the board to transition into the CEO role. Success was by no means guaranteed. Along the way, each stakeholder took deliberate, courageous steps to help move the process along. By October 2015, when the transition was announced in an exclusive article in the Forward, all
of the pieces were in place for Bank to build on Messinger’s legacy with his own unique vision.

**The CEO’s Journey**

How Messinger came to embrace an orderly transition at AJWS depends on whom you ask. Board members recount how her transition was first raised as an issue during their strategic plan in 2011. Spurred by questions from several key donors and partners about when Messinger would step down, board members say they first told Messinger that AJWS needed to begin plans for her succession in the autumn of 2014.

Messinger has a different memory. She recounts a “lightbulb” moment during a phone call with a recruiter inquiring about her interest in another chief executive position. Messinger’s executive vice president, Bank, worked down the hall from her. “I put the phone down and I walked over to his office and I asked him, ‘How often do you get these calls for CEO positions?’” she recalls. Bank told her that he had been fielding such offers but hadn’t told her for fear of upsetting her as she had reacted negatively in the past when strong employees had left AJWS. At that moment, Messinger says, she realized that she risked losing Bank if she didn’t step aside for his ascension to CEO. “He was ready to head something,” Messinger recalls. “I realized this almost too late.”

Messinger had come to rely heavily on Bank since hiring him in 2009 to run internal operations and lead strategy management at the organization—an event she remembers with characteristic self-deprecation and wit. “Around 2008, I reluctantly came to the realization that my brilliant management system wasn’t working. We had grown very quickly, and by 2008, we had three vice presidents who had stopped disclosing the whole truth; instead, they focused only on their department’s successes. I realized I needed someone to oversee operations and challenge the division heads on their Panglossian reports.”

I put the phone down and I walked over to [Robert’s] office and I asked him, ‘How often do you get these calls for CEO positions?’

*Ruth Messinger*
Bank played that role, eventually becoming what both Mesinger and several board members described as the “internal CEO,” which gave Mesinger the flexibility to travel widely, fundraise tirelessly, and act as a sort of spiritual head of the organization and mentor to many of its staff, particularly women.

Pondering the possibility of Bank’s departure, Mesinger realized that he had become the lynchpin of her success. “If he left, I would have to replace him, but anybody I would hire, given my age, would take the job because they were waiting for me to leave. Their focus would be on how quickly they could get me out.

“Meanwhile,” she continues, “the person would have to learn everything about the organization, everything about working with me, which I think is fun, but admittedly not easy. The division heads might be upset they weren’t promoted to replace Robert, or they might not like their new boss, so they might leave. And then I realized, I don’t want this job if I don’t have Robert. And I have no guarantee he is going to stay as executive vice president if I don’t step down.”

At first, the realization that Bank might leave to head up a different organization upset Messinger. But soon she saw a path that could secure her legacy—she would transition power to Bank. “I said to Robert, ‘I think we should talk to the board and say that we’re going to announce on a certain date that you’re going to become the CEO. I will continue to do part-time work for you. And the organization can thrive best with this scenario. The board will love it.’”

Although Messinger had a plan in place, there was still a major obstacle to overcome. Her clear vision for a smooth transition was not one shared by the board—at least not at first.
The Board’s Journey

Succession planning is never a clear-cut task. CEOs have a responsibility to identify and groom potential successors. But hiring a CEO is a board’s responsibility—a board’s primary and most important duty is to appoint and manage its chief executive. This can lead to confusion: A CEO feels responsible for identifying a successor but then doesn’t have the authority to actually assure her or his succession.

By late 2014, AJWS’ board had done deep work on board governance, which had gotten it to a place of deserved confidence in its decision-making. It learned how to be a highly effective board. It hadn’t always been that way. Until the mid-1990s, the board had been composed mostly of friends and family of one of the organization’s founders, Larry Phillips. During Messinger’s tenure, the board was composed of a broader group of engaged supporters, the majority of whom had been recruited by Messinger. Board members rarely asserted their own will or decision-making, which, while not unusual for a high-growth organization, is not best practice. But in the early 2010s, as part of its strategic plan, the board had set new protocols and rules. “There was a feeling that we had matured as a group,” Kathleen Levin, who was board chair at the time, recalls. “We were confident in our role, and we trusted each other.”

In fall of 2014, the board appointed a “top leadership design task force,” comprised of four members, to focus on Messinger’s transition. Because the full board only assembled three times a year, it found assigning small, focused task forces to specific issues to be an effective practice. The leadership design task force also benefited from being a well-balanced group. Marty Friedman, an investment banker, had institutional knowledge, having served as board chair in the earlier years of the organization and on the committee that hired Messinger. Marcella Kanfer Rolnick was an experienced executive with a Stanford MBA who was well-versed in governance protocol as well as how to get the most out of teams. Kathleen Levin, the board chair, was diligent and detail-oriented, and helped keep the team’s proceedings on track. And Barbara Dobkin was an experienced board member who had chaired AJWS’ board during its strategic planning process and board reorganization. She also had a close relationship with Messinger as a former board chair, AJWS donor, and friend.

The task force would come to rely heavily on one another as it pushed the process forward. “Everyone was totally engaged,” Levin says. “I would send out an email to the group and would receive replies within hours. That level of engagement is unusual for a group of volunteers, but it proved essential as the transition unfolded.”

At its formation, the task force was intent on pursuing a “creative” approach to Messinger’s succession. “We did not want to just automatically commence a normative ‘retire the old, in with the
new’ model of succession planning,” Kanfer Rolnick recalls. And when Messinger came to them with her plan to appoint Bank, the group resisted rubber-stamping Bank as the successor. The purpose of the task force was to determine how best to retain Messinger as an asset to the organization and honor her passion and desire to keep contributing while making room for future leadership. The group suggested hiring a consultant to advise them on next steps. “We wanted to be thoughtful and learn from best and creative practices out in the world, not just take the obvious path,” Kanfer Rolnick explains.

The task force’s resistance frustrated Messinger, who wondered if it wasn’t a needless expression of the board’s newfound confidence. “Searches are exciting moments for boards,” Messinger says, suggesting the board’s thinking was, “Why does she get to tell us who to hire? Now we get to play like boards do!”

But the task force members had legitimate reasons for their hesitation. In an era of increased scrutiny from donors and the public on the professionalization of nonprofits, they worried about the optics of a rushed appointment. Without ruling out Bank as a successor, they wanted to take their time to consider alternative approaches to executing the search. Kanfer Rolnick shared with task force members her view that those who rush these processes often must spend more time fixing problems later than they would have spent on careful, upfront planning. “My view is always, ‘you have to move slow to move fast,’” Kanfer Rolnick says.

So, Kanfer Rolnick drafted an RFP for search consultants. After a false start with the first firm it engaged (among other things, one of the principals unexpectedly had to step away for personal reasons, which meant an all-male team would lead the engagement; the task force balked at the loss of expertise left by the principal’s leave and the gender imbalance it created), the task force hired a newly formed consulting firm comprised of past CEOs of major nonprofit organizations. Along with believing the consultants were the best advisers available for the job, the task force felt hiring contemporaries of Messinger with similar profiles and stature would reassure Messinger that age bias was not going to factor into its recommendations. The task force asked for a research round-up of best practices for nonprofit CEO successions.

In early March 2015, in advance of a full board meeting, the consultancy presented its recommendation to Messinger and Bank at a late-night dinner. While the research round-up revealed that insider CEOs tend to outperform external appointments, and externally appointed CEOs have a high failure rate, the consulting firm still suggested launching a national search and that Messinger step away entirely from the organization. Bank, it said,
WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS:

A 2013 survey of nonprofit CEOs found that one reason chief executives step down is because they recognize how hard it is for younger professionals to reach their full potential while a long-term executive is in place. “Creating opportunities for a new generation can be a powerful motive to move on,” the researchers write.

Source: http://www.buildingmovement.org/pdf/Leadership_in_Leaving_FINAL.pdf

could be automatically advanced to the finalist stage, where he would then be put in a two-candidate finalist pool with the best outsider candidate uncovered by the search. This strategy would set Bank up as having earned the CEO role and would enable the board to validate its choice should it select Bank by comparing him to other options.

The task force was taken aback by the absence of creative solutions offered by the consultants. And Messinger was blindsided. She had assumed the consultants would endorse her plan to promote Bank. She worried that Bank would not stick around long enough for a national search to be completed given offers for other chief executive positions that she suspected were coming his way. And even if he did, she worried that requiring a talented insider such as Bank to enter into a leadership contest would demoralize the staff and lead to defections. “I don’t get it,” Messinger responded. “This is a thriving organization, which thrives both because I’m the CEO and Robert’s a great executive vice president. You all don’t know for sure that he can be a CEO. But you’re supposed to trust my judgment and I know he can do it. He lives and breathes this organization.” Messinger asked the task force if she could plead her case to the board, presenting a counter-argument to the consultants. The task force members refused, insisting that the board, not Messinger, should lead the process.

What happened next was a true crisis: Messinger informed the task force that she would withhold assistance in the transition of an externally appointed CEO. It was to be Robert Bank, or she would not offer her full assistance in securing a smooth transition. Given her deep ties to AJWS’ donors and the importance of those donors to AJWS’ financial sustainability, Messinger
was—some members of the task force felt—extorting them with a threat of organizational seppuku. Looking back on it, Messinger regrets the threat, but recalls it being born out of desperation. “I knew at the time—and I know now—that I was right,” Messinger says. “But I don’t have anything good to say about how I did it. [Kathleen Levin] told me on two occasions that I was severely overstepping my bounds, that I was threatening the organization. Each time she said that I said, ‘I don’t disagree.’ But I felt I had no choice.”

Yale School of Management’s Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, who wrote eloquently about CEO departures in his book “The Hero’s Farewell,” describes the end of an illustrious CEO tenure as “a plunge into the abyss of insignificance, a kind of mortality.” A lack of portability of a CEO’s skills makes a chief executive’s retirement especially threatening. To borrow a metaphor from classical music: A musician in an orchestra can continue to perform solo after she leaves the ensemble, but the conductor needs a full ensemble to demonstrate the spectrum of their talents. For Messinger, her transition out of the CEO office had an extra, personal dimension: Her mother had been pushed into retirement prematurely, and Messinger was worried the same thing was happening to her. With Messinger’s threat hanging in the air, the AJWS task force faced two challenges. It had to bring Messinger around while trying to avoid prejudicing the board’s decision.

“Ruth couldn’t understand why we couldn’t just blindly accept her choice, but from a governance perspective, you really need to be careful,” Levin says. “[The selection] can’t be done by one or two board members, it can’t be done by the outgoing CEO. It has to be done by the full board, and every board member has to buy-in, has to feel heard, and has to have the time to deliberate,” she says.

At a full board meeting later that month, the consultants presented their findings in an executive session. There was overwhelming endorsement of their
recommendation to conduct a national search with Bank as an automatic finalist. “It was hard to argue with the fact that [Bank] was a great candidate,” Levin recalls. “But it was also hard to argue that there might be better candidates out there, and we don’t lose anything by looking for them.” Kanfer Rolnick also recalls board members feeling that if Bank prevailed in a national search, the rigorous process would set him up for success by demonstrating that he had earned the role in an objective contest.

Still, following the task force’s principle of “move slow to move fast,” Levin decided not to raise a formal vote at the first meeting, delaying a decision until the board retreat three months later. Levin and Kanfer Rolnick both had niggling doubts: The disconnect between the research presented by the consultants regarding the strength of insider candidates and their recommendation to not immediately appoint a talented insider candidate caused some cognitive dissonance. Kanfer Rolnick reminded the board that finding great CEOs in any industry is not easy, and that outsiders tend to be disruptive. AJWS wasn’t in need of disruption—it was already in a strong place. And, of course, the board was also concerned that an external search might indeed push Bank to leave for a top role at another organization. The board decided to delay a decision until the next board meeting.

In the interim, the task force dispatched Levin and Dobkin to help re-enlist Messinger’s support. Levin appealed to Messinger’s professionalism by continuing to engage with her in a formal manner, reminding her that CEO appointments are ultimately the board’s decision, and keeping her up to date as the full board meeting approached. At the same time, Dobkin, the task force member who had a close friendship with Messinger, met with her several times in person to discuss the emotions involved in the process. She counseled Messinger that stepping down as CEO was not a retirement, but a transition. There would still be plenty of opportunities for Messinger to contribute, both at AJWS and elsewhere.

Dobkin’s background was uniquely helpful for these encounters: She is a trained social worker experienced in difficult conversations, and she is a major donor of AJWS and many other nonprofits, a fact that gave her an unspoken gravitas as the board’s emissary. The wisdom of involving major donors on search committees is an open question, but in this case, Dobkin’s participation proved invaluable. “The most important thing I learned as a social worker is you start with where your client is, and that’s what I did with Ruth,” Dobkin recalls. “I did not project or lecture. I asked her questions about how she was feeling, and I listened. The extraordinary thing about Ruth is that she’s so smart, she knows the right path
deep down, it just sometimes takes her a while to come to it."

Marty Friedman, the longtime board member, agrees, remembering that Messinger had undergone a similar shift from resistance to buy-in over hiring Bank as a number two. “She was always hesitant to bring in a COO because she didn’t feel she needed it, but eventually she came around and it worked beautifully.” Friedman could see the same process unfolding with her acceptance of a board-led transition. Asked whether the task force believed Messinger might actually refuse to assist with the transition, Friedman pauses. “We felt confident it would work out, but there were definitely a few rocky moments along the way.”

The New CEO’s Journey

Robert Bank was born in South Africa but emigrated to the United States as a young man, in part to avoid serving in the South African army in defense of the apartheid government. He trained as a classical pianist at The Juilliard School before earning a law degree and dedicating his professional life to promoting civil rights and international justice. Prior to joining AJWS, he had served in the leadership of GMHC, an organization engaged in combating HIV/AIDS. By 2015, Bank held the deep respect of AJWS’ board, but his tenure had not been without challenges. At one point, one of his reports had made a material error in an internal projection that, once discovered, required the organization to make some difficult adjustments to its ambitious plans. But Bank had impressed the board with how he accepted responsibility and made changes to ensure such errors didn’t reoccur. An ambitious, successful nonprofit executive, by 2015, Bank felt ready to take on a new challenge.

In fact, Bank had been interested in leading a Jewish organization before he joined Messinger at AJWS. He had been deeply impacted by his participation in the Selah Leadership Program in 2005 (a program designed for Jewish social justice leaders working in Jewish and secular organizations) and had been offered a CEO position at a local Jewish not-for-profit in 2008. Through the Selah Program, he met Shifra Bronznick, a well-known consultant in the Jewish community. Bronznick, who was consulting for Messinger at the time, suggested that Messinger meet Bank. Having devoted his career to working on HIV/AIDS issues on the local and global stage, Bank was intrigued by the intersection of AJWS’ Jewish values and global social change. He remembered and admired Messinger’s activism when she served in New York City government and ran for mayor. So he accepted the role of number two at AJWS instead of a top role at another organization. He recalls, at the time, he felt that “the chance to work with Messinger at this point in her career is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”
“When I hired Robert in 2009, I told him he didn’t have to worry about becoming CEO because I was never going to retire,” Messinger recalls. “He became the consummate number two because that’s what was asked of him.”

Reflecting on his upbringing in South Africa, Bank shared:

“In a very complex environment, there was a small Jewish minority in a country that was a dictatorship with fake democracy. Understanding what it meant to be a white person that discriminated legally against 45 million people, and who were denied the right to vote, had a huge impact.”

_The Jewish News of Northern California, 2016_

As a CEO candidate, Bank had a lot working in his favor: He had the respect of the staff and the board; he was a reliable internal operator; and he had co-led the formation and execution of the recently completed strategic plan with Kanfer Rolnick. Bank had also built a team of high-performing division heads—personally hiring all five vice presidents—and had demonstrated financial stewardship by building a reserve fund.

The board had no doubt Bank could be a successful internal manager. The question was whether he could step into the limelight that shines on such a public figure in the international NGO and Jewish community. In Messinger’s absence he would need to continue her fundraising record as well as chart his own strategic vision for AJWS. “He had been a great lieutenant but, in so doing, he had never put any light between himself and Ruth,” Friedman explains. In particular, Messinger was a prolific fundraiser and charismatic speaker; the board felt it had a lot to lose if Bank couldn’t display similar qualities.

When the board reconvened for its Q2 retreat in June 2015, Bank was top of mind. The three-month deliberation period had resulted in Bank’s steady competence coming into focus. Levin set aside an entire day for executive session, and in the morning, she divided the 30-member board into six-to eight-person subgroups, and asked them to discuss framing questions such as “What qualities are we looking for in a CEO?” and “What is our goal for AJWS?”

“I’m circling around the tables, and I’m listening, and I realize that each table is talking about Robert, about what qualities he has, about how we need someone ‘like Robert,’” Levin recalls. “So I stopped the break-out session early. I reassembled the entire board, and I said,
‘We are all talking about the same thing. We are talking about Robert Bank.’”

Levin says that every board member—save two—endorsed Bank at that point, a reversal from three months earlier. A few still favored a national search as part of due diligence, but enough of the board worried that a delay would risk losing both Bank and Messinger that the decision was made to move quickly. The board agreed on a compromise: Bank would be brought in for a formal interview where he would lay out a vision for AJWS’ future, and the board would meet with the organization’s key major donors and external stakeholders to see if anyone objected to Bank’s ascension. The executive team would also be interviewed about Bank. If any red flags appeared, a national search would begin.

In a perfect world, one in which Messinger had started planning her transition well in advance—and she and the board had been more proactive in identifying and grooming a successor—Bank may have been given opportunities to demonstrate and develop his ability to handle public and donor relations, as well as his vision for AJWS’ future. Now he had two interviews—one with the task force and one with the entire board—to convince them both of his readiness.

He aced both interviews. Bank remembers the interview with the full board as “a high point of my career—an opportunity to share my focused vision for AJWS’ future with people I knew well but who did not know me in the role of CEO.” Focusing on a core theme of “strategic stability,” Bank promised to continue the trajectory set by AJWS’ strategic plan of which he had been a primary architect in collaboration with the board and staff. He emphasized the strong relations with his senior management team, and the fact that he and Messinger could partner together through the transition to keep major donors in the fold. But he also spoke of opportunities for innovation for the next CEO, focusing on increasing the organization’s ability to demonstrate impact and field leadership; its ability to grow its funding, reputation, and emotional connection with stakeholders; and the need to elevate work on internal culture with greater inclusion of the global staff and a view to sustaining a high level of performance. The board was impressed with his composure during the entire process and his comportment during the interview. While there were still questions about his ability to handle external relations for AJWS, his performance during the interview was a very strong, positive indicator of his comfort and aplomb in high-stakes encounters.

“He never lost one iota of professionalism, even though the process had to be hard on him. We knew he was receiving other offers, which adds extra uncertainty and stress for a candidate,” Levin said. “Yet he handled the interview incredibly well.”
Following his interview, the board approved his selection as CEO.

Despite enthusiasm generated by the decision, the board—as well as Bank and Messinger—sensed that the key to his success would be a thoughtful handoff from her. In the private sector, whether new CEOs are hired from the outside or promoted from within, they face daunting odds: One-third to one-half of new chief executives fail within their first 18 months. An effective transition can help tip the scale in the incoming executive’s favor. The board staked out a three-month period from the moment his selection would be announced to the day he would officially begin. It tasked Bank and Messinger to come up with a transition plan together.

What does a successful transition plan look like? There is an old management joke in which a newly hired CEO passes the departing CEO in the hallway, asks for advice, and is told that as crises arise, she should consult two envelopes left in her desk drawer. Six months later she hits her first crisis. Uncertain how to respond, she opens the first envelope and sees the advice: “Blame your predecessor.” Six months later she has occasion to grab for the second envelope; this time it reads, “Prepare two envelopes.” Bank and Messinger committed to a more thorough process. The first question they addressed was whether Messinger should continue in a formal capacity at AJWS. In general, most leadership experts agree that it is better for a departing CEO to “hand off and ride off” after a transition. But research by the Bridgespan Group published in the Stanford Social Innovation Review found that long-serving, charismatic founders, as an exception, may add value by remaining involved formally with the organization after they step down—“in order to maintain funder, board, and staff loyalty, while allowing the new leader to benefit from the founder’s capabilities and knowledge.” While Messinger was

There is a deep connection between the lessons of Jewish history and the people we are supporting in the developing world. We draw upon those lessons every day.

ROBERT BANK
not technically a founder, the length of her tenure at AJWS and her considerable accomplishments take on many “founder” qualities.

As part of empowering his ascension into the top job, the board told Bank that it was entirely his decision what role Messinger would play moving forward. Bank had seen other organizations create empty roles for departing executives, granting them titles and salaries simply to avoid having a difficult conversation about their departure. He wanted to make sure that he found ways for Messinger to continue to add value to the organization—both for AJWS’ sake and to assuage any doubt Messinger had that she was being asked to “retire.” Following discussions with Messinger, he decided on the role of “global ambassador,” which would involve three responsibilities: continue to work with faith communities, partner with the staff responsible for AJWS’ signature Global Justice Fellowship program that engages rabbis to advocate for global human rights, and continue to support Bank with a small number of funders. The role would be an “at will” appointment, reporting to Bank.

Ensuring Messinger’s continued involvement in the organization also brought unexpected challenges. Bank needed to strike a balance: He wanted to honor Messinger’s tenure and support her ongoing contributions, but he also needed to ensure she didn’t unintentionally undermine him as he established new relationships with staff and external stakeholders. In short, he needed to be seen in a new light and couldn’t risk being overshadowed.

At times, he was forced to take steps to create distance from Messinger. For example, she wanted an office, but Bank felt he couldn’t justify the expense and was concerned that Messinger’s physical presence would confuse the staff. Messinger wanted to retain her executive assistant, but Bank again felt he couldn’t justify the cost. More than a year after the transition, Messinger asked for permission to join the board of an organization supported by AJWS; Bank felt it would create a conflict of interest and denied the request.

As they worked to untangle some of these issues, Messinger approached Bank and suggested they meet with an external executive coach, Matthew Tye. The offer was a generous one—Messinger knew that Tye had been Bank’s long-serving executive coach, so she was offering to meet Bank on his terms. “I had differences with Ruth over the transition process,” Levin says. “But I’ll say this, when it came to the actual handoff, she handled herself beautifully.”

Tye understood that Bank and Messinger were both undergoing major transitions in their lives. But he felt their sessions together would be most successful if they focused not on the deep emotions elicited by the transition but on everyday matters; many of their sessions revolved around the establishment of—a clear timeline for the transition,
with dates set for various handovers and landmarks.

“If people are going to have resistance to anything, it will emerge on the timeline, and the timeline will provide a safe way to explore some of these issues,” Tye explains. “For instance, Ruth initially resisted putting dates to things—basic things like ‘here’s the day you’ll stop coming to the office every day,’ and ‘here’s the date you’ll vacate your office.’ As we talked, it emerged that setting dates was the moment that the transition started to feel real to her.” The transactional conversations around minutia turned out to be the best way for the pair to address the big emotional and psychic issues related to the transition.

Messinger and Bank met with Tye every two weeks and shared emails between meetings when issues arose. Messinger also arranged meetings with key donors and other stakeholders, during which she introduced Bank as her successor in glowing terms. As the date of Bank’s official appointment approached, Messinger suggested another action that Bank would come to view as essential for his success: On the advice of her husband, she volunteered to leave Manhattan for a six-week vacation the day Bank took over. There would be no non-emergency contact with AJWS during that time. “I was lucky. I had a husband who told me, ‘We are going as far away as possible the day this takes effect,’” Messinger recalls. “It was the best thing I could have done for Robert—and for myself.” For several months after she returned, and took on her new role at AJWS, Messinger maintained a physical separation from AJWS; for a period, all of her meetings took place outside of the AJWS offices.

Messinger stepped down in July 2016. At the end of June, AJWS staff arranged a small goodbye party at the AJWS offices. But a month after Messinger returned from her time away, Bank and the board arranged for her to be feted on a larger scale. AJWS hosted a gala that attracted around 550 attendees at Chelsea Piers in New York City. The title of the gala was “Messinger of Hope: A gala honoring Ruth W. Messinger, champion of dignity, justice, and equality.” Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the president of the Union for Reform Judaism, performed a blessing over Bank and Messinger as they held hands. AJWS announced an award in Messinger’s honor and named a Cambodian grantee leader, Sitha Mark, who works on the conditions of women in the garment industry as the first recipient. Leymah Gbowee, the Liberian peace activist and Nobel laureate, gave a speech in honor of Messinger’s leadership, as did the actors Mandy Patinkin and Kathryn Grody. Levin gave the closing remarks.

In the months after Messinger stepped down, Bank made it a priority to meet with each board member on his own, asking them what he could do to improve the efficacy of board meetings. He also scheduled lunch meetings with
five or six staff a week, until he had personally met with all 140 of AJWS full-time workers. While originally scheduled as a way for staff to feel comfortable with him, these meetings had a bigger impact on him than he had anticipated. “It helped me understand the immense responsibility of managing the organization,” he recalls. He also held a global retreat in which people from 19 countries and all of the states in which AJWS works came to New York and spent a full week together focusing on organizational culture and performance in the workplace.

In 2019, Bank backfilled his replacement, putting in place an executive vice president to oversee the division heads as he once had done under Messinger. The board’s concerns that Bank wouldn’t be able to match Messinger’s fundraising ability have proven unfounded. “He’s been a star for us in that regard,” Friedman says. Bank has continued to build the organization’s strategic focus. In fact, the board and staff have recently completed AJWS’ next five-year strategic plan.

Looking back at the transition, longtime board member Marty Friedman is somewhat bemused by how the process played out. “We thought we might design a different model of leadership, but, in the end, stuck with a more traditional structure. We engaged outside advisors who we thought were excellent and then decided to ignore their advice. In retrospect, choosing Robert without conducting a broader search might have been the ‘obvious choice,’ but it wasn’t obvious to us and only developed organically from much conversation, deliberation, and soul searching,” he says.

It certainly wasn’t always by the book, but AJWS’ board pulled off a successful transition involving a long-serving executive and her faithful deputy. To do it, it needed time and patience—some transitions cannot be rushed. Could it have compressed the timeframe—or saved the main protagonists stress and uncertainty—if it had engaged in earlier and more direct conversations with Messinger about her succession plan, or started viewing Bank as a potential successor earlier? Perhaps. But with such a high-stakes—and high-emotion—transition, all’s well that ends well.

Robert Bank continues to learn on the job, something he’s accepted as part of his acclimatizing to the top role. “One of the best pieces of advice Ruth gave me was that there are certain aspects of this job that you can’t learn until you sit in the seat. And she was right,” he says. “Every day gives me the opportunity to become a better leader and learn something new.”
Request for Proposals - Top Leadership Design: Planning for our Future
American Jewish World Service

Request for Proposals - Top Leadership Design: Planning for our Future

Background:

American Jewish World Service (AJWS) is the leading Jewish human rights and development organization working to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world. We pursue lasting change by providing support to local grassroots and global human rights organizations working in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and by mobilizing American Jews and others in the U.S. to advocate for policies that will benefit people in the developing world. We focus on three areas of work:

- **Advancing the Health and Human Rights of Women, Girls and LGBT People**
  - We support women, girls and LGBT people so that they can stop violence and discrimination, gain control over their lives and bodies, and live in health, safety and dignity.

- **Promoting Recovery from Conflict and Oppression**
  - We aid communities in their work to recover from conflicts, fight oppression, speak out against injustice, and create vibrant, peaceful societies that respect the rights of all citizens.

- **Defending Access to Food, Land and Livelihoods**
  - We support communities that are protecting the land, water and natural resources that they depend on for survival.

Following the development and ratification of the organization’s first-ever enterprise-wide strategic plan in October 2011, AJWS has been upgrading its top leadership team. The organization is now beginning the process of developing a transition plan for its current President and long-time leader, Ruth Messinger. While Ruth has no immediate plans to retire, AJWS believes thoughtfully assessing its mid-to longer-term leadership needs and options will ensure continuing stability and support its mid- and longer-range aspirations for growth. In addition, developing a plan should help address questions sometimes raised by important external – and internal – stakeholders.

Ruth Messinger has earned tremendous respect and confidence of AJWS stakeholders over her 15-year tenure as the organization’s leader. She has, in many ways, become synonymous with AJWS as, under her stewardship, the organization evolved from a relatively small enterprise ($4.5mm with eight employees) into a robust, internationally acclaimed leader ($50+mm with 120 employees). Ruth has been especially effective in cultivating deep and resilient relationships with external stakeholders: funders, collegial organizations, political leaders and policy makers.

Under Ruth’s leadership, AJWS has attracted and developed a robust Executive Team. As Executive Vice President, Robert Bank has been a very capable partner to Ruth for the past four years. In addition, AJWS now has six strong vice presidents (five of whom joined the organization after the ratification of the strategic plan as part of its implementation) responsible for international programs; national programs; strategic learning, research & evaluation; development; finance & administration; and strategic communications.
AJWS wishes to develop a top leadership design for a 5+ year horizon according to a transition strategy and plan. To be clear, we are not looking to implement immediate succession nor do we want no succession activities to happen until the end of five years. Instead, we seek a thoughtful plan that will evolve the organization’s leadership as appropriate over time. Furthermore, no one should infer our current focus on developing a leadership transition suggests we are making specific plans for Ruth’s retirement (in five years or otherwise). We expect the design process will wrestle with all of these issues and the final plan will ideally include mechanisms to adapt to changing circumstances.

We seek a consultant(s) with expertise in executive leadership and succession planning who will work with and report to the Top Leadership Design Task Force of AJWS’s Board of Directors. Members of the Task Force are the current board chair, the immediate past board chair, another former board chair who recently completed his board term, and a member of the board’s executive committee who chaired the strategic planning process. The scope of the engagement is such that the consultant(s) will:

1. Familiarize themselves with the AJWS mission, values, strategy, financials, and brand identity; current organizational structure and background, including bios of Executive Team members; Board of Trustees background; and other relevant information.¹
2. Conduct an internal and external scan tightly focused on the issue of leadership²:
   a. Seek input from current Executive Team (ET) members and understand their potential growth and aspirations. Understand what is working today in the design. Determine competencies needed given the organization’s growth plans.
   b. Learn from other organizations’ successes and failures, in particular those that could be “out of the box” models.
3. Analyze the internal and external scan data and generate multiple design strategy options for top leadership.
4. Work with the AJWS task force leadership and appropriate AJWS stakeholders to recommend a strategy for 5+ years that is accepted by Ruth and the other members of the ET and that:

¹ See Other Information section below for list of types of documents we have assembled to support efficient, effective consultant onboarding to AJWS and this engagement.
² AJWS has done robust strategic plan and implementation over the past few years. The scope of this engagement should not include revisiting the organization’s mission, vision or core strategies.
a. Includes recommended “top leadership” organizational chart and any new/changed role profiles that are documented, unambiguous, and grounded in both others’ learnings as well as the unique attributes of AJWS.
b. Considers other ET members already in place and identifies the qualities of the desired “atom” to fill in the leadership molecule at AJWS.

c. Considers the possible need to have “Time 1” (Ruth in some role, either current or new) and “Time 2” (Ruth’s retirement) designs to reflect any glide pathing the ultimate design (“Time 2”) might require.
d. Includes a sketch (at a minimum) of total compensation for new/changed role(s).
e. Identifies and develops (and/or, in some cases, includes a plan to develop) the necessary preconditions for successful implementation of the strategy, e.g. executive coaching for Ruth, development pathway for any internal team members who might migrate, guiding principles/norms for planned successor’s and Ruth’s ways of working together should the design call for their collaboration, etc.

5. Deliver the Top Leadership Design Task Force with strategy and plan to be ratified by the AJWS Board of Directors at the Board meeting on Monday, March 23, 2015, in New York, NY.

6. Optional: We believe we might find that we are doing breakthrough planning in a time of tremendous leadership turnover in the (Jewish) nonprofit sector. This might create the opportunity to publish a piece in, for instance, Stanford Social Innovation Review and/or eJewishPhilanthropy, or other reputable media outlets, that shares our thoughtful process and reinforces AJWS’s and Ruth’s forward thinking and planning. This could be co-authored by the consultant and members of the task force.

Consultant Qualifications:

The consultant should be an individual or firm that:

1. Has experience in the development of executive leadership succession plans and strategies for nonprofit entities beyond (though not necessarily excluding) executive search. Has experience analyzing and assessing competencies.

2. Has a broad and up-to-date understanding of the current climate on leadership in the nonprofit sector. Draws upon external resources including research, white papers, colleagues, etc.

3. Has a meaningful and up-to-date understanding of human behavior and social/behavioral psychology, in particular vis-à-vis leadership. Draws upon external resources including research, white papers, colleagues, etc.

4. Engages deeply in both the big picture and nuances of AJWS’s needs in a leadership transition process. Thinks whole systems, i.e. attends to all the dynamics this will create rather than just focusing on the most obvious effort of preparing to select a new person to be President.

Read Eric Flamholtz’s article on “leadership molecules” and apply insights to this process: http://www.senatehall.com/uploads/fck/The%20Leadership%20Molecule%20Hypothesis_%20Implications%20for%20Entrepreneurial%20Organizations.pdf
5. Has a demonstrated track record of working efficiently, discreetly, and in such a way that inspires trust and confidence. Keeps full confidentiality.
6. Will work collaboratively with AJWS’s Board task force and appropriate stakeholders.
7. Comprises team members that can develop an appropriate rapport with Ruth and ET members while retaining objectivity required for a successful process and outcome.

Process:

Individuals or firms wishing to be considered as consultants for this project should submit a proposal by Monday, June 2, 2014, including the following items:

1. A proposed work plan, including timetable and expectations for board, staff, and other stakeholder involvement as deemed desirable/necessary, for completing the assignment.
2. A budget for the project.
3. Assumptions about conditions for this project to be successful.
4. The consultant’s qualifications for the project and, as relevant, specific roles for each member of a firm who would be assigned to the project.
5. A brief description of relevant work performed for other clients.
6. Contact information for 3-5 references who can be contacted about the consultant’s work.
7. Any samples of work that the consultant wishes to share.

All materials may be submitted via email to Joshua Fried at jfried@ajws.org.

Important Dates

1. The deadline for proposals is Monday, June 2, 2014.
2. Prospective consultants will be notified by Wednesday, June 11, if they will be interviewed by the selection team on Thursday, June 19. Final selection of a consultant will be made no later than Monday, June 30.
3. The contract between AJWS and consultant will be signed expeditiously and work will begin immediately.
5. As you consider project pacing in your proposal, bear in mind the following dates currently known to AJWS between now and March 2015:
   a. Office closed for Jewish holiday observance: June 3-5, 2014; September 24-26, 2014; and October 3, 8-10, and 15-17, 2014.
   b. Study tours that key leadership will be out of the country for: June 21-29, 2014; November 1-9, 2014.
   c. Many key stakeholders will be vacationing at some point in July and August.
Other Information

1. Board must have the opportunity to reflect on findings from scan as well as emerging design directions prior to the March 2015 board meeting where we will request final recommendation ratification.

2. We anticipate that all in-scope activities will be completed within the period of the contract. Follow-on support for the implementation of the strategy and plan may be desired; this will be scoped separately as needed.

3. All in-person meetings will be convened in New York, NY. For those not in NY, phone- or video-conference interviews can be set up.

4. The consultant’s logistics/administrative contact will be Joshua Fried (jfried@ajws.org). There will be one task force member serving at the consultant’s main point of contact on the substance of the engagement.

5. The types of documents that AJWS has assembled to support efficient, effective consultant onboarding includes:
   a. Strategic Plan and inputs into the plan, e.g. Environmental Scan, Trend Analysis
   b. Organizational Chart
   c. Executive Team Background
   d. Board of Trustees Background
   e. Bylaws
   f. Governance/Board Development documents
   g. Sample Major Donor Proposals and Reports
   h. Financial Statements & Current Budget
   i. Prior Organizational Reports, Results & Budgets
   j. IRS filings

Inquiries related to preparing this RFP should be directed to Joshua Fried via email. Prior to submitting a written proposal, candidates may request written responses to emailed questions and/or telephone conversations.
APPENDIX - GALA PROGRAM TO HONOR RUTH MESSINGER

MESSINGER OF HOPE

A gala honoring Ruth W. Messinger, champion of dignity, justice and equality
**APPENDIX - GALA PROGRAM TO HONOR RUTH MESSINGER**

**Introducing The Ruth W. Messinger Fund**

Since our founding 30 years ago, steady fundraising and fiscal integrity have brought us to our current place of strength. Now that we are entering our fourth decade, we are building a reserve fund to propel AJWS into the future.

The Ruth W. Messinger Fund—a reserve equal to half our annual budget—will provide stability for our work to promote human rights in the developing world and increase our ability to respond nimbly to disasters, address critical challenges and seize extraordinary opportunities.

We are grateful to our early leadership donors, who have helped us reach over $13 million of the $18.3 million goal.

Ruth has transformed millions of lives by leading AJWS through 18 years of remarkable growth. You can transform millions more by securing AJWS’s future sustainability.

**Early Lead Donors**

- Dr. Marion Bergman & Stanley Bergman
- Charina Endowment Fund
- Cynthia & Jay Cohan
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- Lori Olenick Dube & Monte Dube
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- Amy & Eric Sahn
- Kay & Stanley Schlozman
- Judy & Jack Stern
- Bea & Sam Wilderman

*List in formation*
MESSINGER OF HOPE

WELCOME
EILEEN EPSTEIN, Gala Chair

BLESSING
RABBI RICK JACOBS, President, Union for Reform Judaism

REMARKS
ROBERT BANK, President and CEO, American Jewish World Service

AWARD PRESENTATION
THE RUTH W. MESSINGER AWARD
For outstanding contributions to social change

Presented to CHANNSITHA MARK,
Coordinator, Workers’ Information Center, Cambodia

Presented by KATHRYN GRODY, Actress and Writer

HONORING
RUTH W. MESSINGER,
Global Ambassador, American Jewish World Service
For 18 years of visionary leadership and extraordinary commitment to social justice

Presented by LEYMAH GBOWEE, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and Director, Women Peace and Security Network Africa

LIVE AUCTION
ABRA ANNES SILLS, Founder, Generosity Auctions

PERFORMANCE
SWEET HONEY IN THE ROCK
Grammy-nominated female African-American a cappella ensemble

CLOSING
KATHLEEN LEVIN, Chair, AJWS Board of Trustees
L’CHAIM – CELEBRATING 18 YEARS OF RUTH MESSINGER

Ruth/AJWS staff party
Tuesday June 28, 2016 | 3:00pm-5:00pm eastern
11th Floor Conference Room | Dial In: 1-877-647-3411 | Passcode: 847450#

2:00 – 2:45  Staff set up

3:00 – 3:10  Staff assemble in room, get food
Music playing

3:10 – 3:20  Robert welcomes and frames
Theme
First toast

3:20 – 3:25  Lilach and Joshua welcome
Food, fun, roast

3:25 – 3:30  Comms gala video

3:30 – 3:40  Finance & Administration

3:40 – 3:50  Development

3:50 – 4:00  Tier 1

4:00 – 4:10  B-roll or food break

4:10 – 4:20  SLRE

4:20 – 4:30  Communications

4:30 – 4:40  Programs

4:40 – 4:50  Ruth speaks

4:50 – 5:00  Staff toast and gifts
Tzedakah box: Allison Lee
Staff notes: Joshua
Trip: Stefanie and Robert

5:00  Formal program ends
Eben Harrell is a senior editor at Harvard Business Review (HBR). Before joining HBR, Harrell worked as a foreign correspondent in the London bureau of TIME; as an associate at the Harvard Kennedy School; and as the head of thought leadership for L.E.K. Consulting, a strategy consultancy. An award-winning reporter, writer, and editor, Harrell has published articles in TIME, The Economist, The Washington Post, Sports Illustrated, and other major titles. In 2017, Harrell and UC Berkeley professor Dacher Keltner won the Warren Bennis Prize, which is awarded each year by the USC Marshall School of Business to the editor and author of the best article on leadership in Harvard Business Review. Harrell holds a master’s degree from the University of St. Andrews and a bachelor of arts from Princeton University.
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ABOUT LEADING EDGE

Founded in 2014, Leading Edge seeks to influence, inspire, and enable dramatic change in attracting, developing, and retaining top talent for Jewish organizations so that the Jewish nonprofit sector may thrive.

www.leadingedge.org

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