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Management for Growth

Michal Dagan

Sunday, 16 July 2006, was a pleasant summer day and the first day of another busy week here at Mahut Center, Haifa. Our center was relatively young then and, only four months earlier, we had moved to our new office in the Lower City, Haifa. Suddenly at nine o'clock in the morning, we heard the sharp sounds of sirens and the strong blasts of explosions, which shook the building. These noises were unmistakable — missiles were falling around us, and then we realized, there was a war going on. A while later we found out that during the same missile attack, eight railroad workers were killed in the train hangar right across the road from us. The war, which had started four days earlier as a limited military operation near the Lebanese border, had now reached us. The Second Lebanon War lasted thirty-three days and its violence was experienced by all residents of northern Israel. In this war, not only were houses ruined — the space that we nurtured as our protected and protective space was also laid in ruin, as was our productive life routine.

The “welfare state” in Israel has been in a process of deterioration for many years now, but the war dramatically exposed this reality. The authorities were not prepared for the war, and the civil population, especially underprivileged and impoverished civilians, of whom women and children make up the majority, were left without essential services, protection or livelihood. Women who live in poverty are an especially vulnerable social group; their economic vulnerability exposes them to violence. For underprivileged women, who do not have any financial reserves and lack emotional support, the war had accentuated their feelings of destitution, defenselessness, loneliness, distress, and neglect and therefore, was an exceptionally traumatic experience.

During the war, the day-to-day work of Mahut Center was suspended. We could not hold courses or workshops nor provide women with job-seeking or placement

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services. The office, which was located in an area subjected to frequent bombing, was closed. As the director, I was facing the question of whether to close the center and dismiss its staff until the war ended, or join the nationwide effort to provide emergency services that differ completely from our skills and mission. I consulted the staff and we decided to act. Seeing that the governmental systems were paralyzed, we felt that we should not let disorder, confusion, and fear take over and that we should work to support women in these distressful times — to provide them with necessities for their survival, to listen to their needs, to make them feel that they are not alone, and to give them confidence and hope. Consequently, we divided work between us, and each started working from her own home. We phoned women who were using the center's employment services — impoverished women, many of whom are survivors of violence, and single mothers. We worked to identify emergency needs among these women. We gave out food packages, and we actively connected these women with various bodies and individuals in the community and the municipality.

These times of intensive activity — which included defining objectives, building a daily schedule, and working actively to accomplish our tasks — had a strengthening, uniting, and trust-building effect on us. This was both true for us, the staff, as well as for our women participants. At the same time, we started carrying out sessions of “emotional processing” among the staff members, which I encouraged: At the end of each day, sometimes at night, we would talk, e-mail, share our experiences, and give each other some comfort and hope; in this way we deepened our connection and supported each other. In a state of war, we sometimes feel compelled to function only for our survival, but this is the time when it is important not to forget to listen to each other and to share our emotions. In a state of war, organizations, as well as individuals, find themselves functioning under extreme conditions, but I needed to combine my role as a leader who conducts targeted actions with my effort to be a supportive, caring, and maybe even motherly, figure.

While we were assisting women, they were telling us about their situations and about their feelings: the anxiety, the pain, the anger, and the feeling that the state has abandoned them. We listened to their testimonies and stories. When somebody listens to you, it is at least as comforting as a food package arriving on time and so, alongside our intensive commotion of “doing,” we set up a comforting space of “being.” Having somebody to talk to relieved, if only for a short while, the loneliness experienced by so many women during the war. In the very first days of our emergency activities, I asked staff members to document women's stories. I had no idea what we would do with these testimonies after the war ended, or if we would use them at all, but we could sense the special importance and significance of their voices, which are usually silenced, ignored, and cast aside in times of peace, and all the more so in times of war.

For us, the time of war was a constructive and productive period. But it was listening to women's stories and recognizing their importance that marked a turning

point and formed a basis for our organization's growth. After the cease-fire agreement, we realized that the distress experienced by women during the war did not disappear after returning to "ordinary" life. We thought that women's outlook on the war as well as the war's implications on their financial and employment conditions should be published and brought to the public consciousness.

The report, *Living Testimony: Women in a War Economy*,¹ which we published several months later, marked the beginning of an extensive long-term project aimed at bringing about wide-ranging socioeconomic change and at promoting the concept of decent work. A major component of this project is the publication of reports that portray the harsh reality of the Israeli employment market through the eyes of women who play an active role in it. Two reports followed later: *Women Workers in a Precarious Employment Market*² and *Managers in Chains*.³ These days we are working on a new report that portrays the problems and barriers faced by middle-aged women in the employment market. These reports are an important channel for bringing the voice of women to the public's consciousness; they show the importance of their employment stories as a source of social and economic knowledge. These personal stories allow us to characterize, define, and portray harmful employment structures, practices, trends, and policies that are taking over the employment market. The reports call on us to look for ways to transform the economy of exploitation and control into an economy of equal opportunities for all.

Our reports are used extensively for awareness-raising activities. Based on the insights presented in them, Mahut Center and other organizations have already developed social-change projects. In addition, they have been cited in various academic and governmental papers and have been included in the syllabi of several social science courses in Israeli universities. These documentation projects draw their strength, their meaning, and their uniqueness from the close relation we have with the women who approach our center. In the midst of the turmoil of economy (or war), we find it important to stop and listen — listen to the silenced voices of employees, which can describe the reality of the employment market — not by looking at it from afar, but by being at its very heart.

Combining social-change work aimed at promoting women's economic empowerment with research based on fieldwork is central to Mahut Center and has been recognized as such by various bodies with which we work.

Management for Change

Another defining process that developed our uniqueness as a means for future growth and for strengthening our belief in our mission took place during 2009. It did not have a definite, dramatic starting point, such as the commencement of the war, but stemmed from a process and may have generated a critical change for our

organization's long-term capacity building. We decided to move from assisting women of a wide age range to specializing in the employment advancement of middle-aged women who are over forty. Every growth involves a change, (although naturally, not every change involves a growth) and therefore, the distinction between the two is not quite clear. Nevertheless, I feel that leading a change presents a much more complex and difficult challenge than leading a growth.

Several events and processes have led me to realize that a change was needed: the economic crisis that started in 2008 and worsened in 2009 and its harsh implications on underprivileged women's employment, as well as the competition resulting from the significant rise in the number of employment programs. All these and other factors had a negative effect on our work. I realized I must lead a change without delay: to present these issues before the staff and board of directors, to discuss the need for a change, and to indicate possible solutions. Such solutions would involve redefining our organization's professional specialization and maybe even the sector with which we work. Moreover, a change that would lead to sustainability must be genuine; that is, it must stem from the organization's real character and qualities and answer an actual need. Change must come from a deep acquaintance with the women who approach us and with their needs as well as from a deep acquaintance with the solutions that already exist in the field. Why did we choose to start working with women over forty? Because for various reasons, the percentage of middle-aged women that approached Mahut Center was relatively high; because they form a large and growing social group that has to cope with harsh discrimination and other barriers in the employment market; because there are almost no programs that focus on employment advancement for middle-aged women (or men); because, looking into the future, I realized that such a change offers an opportunity for developing a specialized work model and a knowledge base that would become increasingly necessary in the near future.

As opposed to the immediate action needed in a time of war, I realized that in this case, it is possible and important to lead a calculated and carefully planned process of change. This process, with everybody in the organization involved, was based on insights drawn from our day-to-day work at the center. It included gathering knowledge from Israel and abroad, talking with the women who approach us, conducting strategic discussions, forming a comprehensive work program, developing resources, establishing collaborations, increasing our visibility, and various other strenuous preparations. Instead of giving a detailed description of the change process, I would like to indicate two of its most significant elements: The first element is the necessary changes we had to make in our organization's identity — its perceptions, work patterns, and consciousness — a process that raised conflicts, fears, and sometimes objections; these needed to be resolved mutually, while combining determination with acceptance. The second element is the length of time it took us

to undergo the change. We initially decided that we would start implementing the new program by the beginning of 2010, and so the change process stretched over a year (from the beginning of 2009) and developed slowly at the same time that we were conducting our day-to-day work. I thought it important to devote a long time for such a significant change process, because while trying to manage in the present with complex budget problems, we were directing our efforts at future developments and changes. At the present, the beginning of 2010, we are starting to see signs of success: more and more women over forty are approaching our center, various organizations and bodies are interested in establishing collaborative projects with us, and our staff is enthusiastic and excited about our new direction.

Acting Here and Now, Thinking Far Ahead

“Act here and now, think far ahead,” my late mother, Ora, used to say to me. I have often used her inspiring words in my private life as well as in my work. For me, these words form the essential principles of how to lead and direct an organization during times of crisis and of adaptive capacity in general.

- Acting here and now means working with women, being with them, understating their real needs. Thinking far ahead means disseminating our knowledge, developing programs, and advancing change.
- Acting here and now means continually supporting women. Thinking far ahead means empowering them and establishing their ability and their right to control their destiny and to conduct a decent economic and social life.
- Acting here and now means listening to a woman’s story. Thinking far ahead means understanding its relevance, expanding its visibility, and raising awareness of it.
- Acting here and now means recognizing difficulties and obstacles. Thinking far ahead means knowing how to translate them into opportunities.
- Acting here and now means coping with and enduring troubles and surviving crises. Thinking far ahead means giving meaning and significance to this survival.
- Acting here and now means living in uncertainty. Thinking far ahead means transforming it into security.
- Acting here and now means investing in the present. Thinking far ahead means aiming at the future.

Acting here and now means offering a helping hand. We live and work in a precarious world that constantly challenges our ability to survive and compels us to change and transform and develop our sustainability. This is true for all of us — our organization

as well as the women we assist. And so, the caring and protecting hand is also the hand that should hold and lead us along the way toward a new future.

Translated from the Hebrew by Yoram Arnon



Notes

1. Ya'ara Buksbaum, Dorit Avramovich, and Michal Dagan, *Living Testimony: Women in a War Economy* (Haifa: Mahut Center, 2007. Published in Hebrew and Arabic).
2. Ya'ara Buksbaum, Michal Dagan, Umayma Diab, and Dorit Avramovich, *Women Workers in a Precarious Employment Market* (Haifa: Mahut Center, 2008. Published in Hebrew, Arabic, and English).
3. Ya'ara Buksbaum, Michal Dagan, and Chava Nishri, *Managers in Chains* (Haifa: Mahut Center, 2009. Published in Hebrew).



