

**JOSEPH REIMER**

*Leadership at Ramah:  
The Changing Role of the Camp Director*

**T**HE WORLD OF JEWISH CAMPING is rapidly changing. We alumni of these camps may think of them as unchanging islands of calm and repose. But nothing could be further from the truth. While we have been living our busy lives, these camps have undergone dramatic changes that call for serious investigation. What does it take in our era of globalization for Jewish camps to remain both attractive to Jewish families and effective as instruments for the transmission of Jewish culture and religious traditions?

This essay focuses on the Ramah overnight camps and particularly, on the directors of those camps. In reading the literature on Ramah, I was struck by how little focus there is on the professional camp director. I find that surprising because in recent decades in the literature on schools, there has been a great deal of focus on the school principal as a leader in that context. I learned from that literature and my own professional experience that a voluntary educational system cannot grow and develop without direction from a sustaining, stable, and forward-looking leadership—especially in times of rapid institutional change.

I argue throughout this essay that although Ramah at 60 has every reason to be proud of its Jewish educational legacy and vision, there must be a serious reckoning about how this movement can simultaneously remain faithful to its core mission *and* creatively respond to the rapidly changing world of Jewish camping. Ramah cannot afford either to jettison its basic educational principles or to rely on those principles alone as an adequate response to these changing times. Indeed, the great challenge to Ramah leaders—and particularly, its camp directors—is how to present the core Ramah principles in ways that still excite key stakeholders while also creatively reinventing many aspects

**JOSEPH REIMER, Ed.D.**, is the director of the Institute for Informal Jewish Education and associate professor and former director of the Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program at Brandeis University. Dr. Reimer serves as lead faculty for the Executive Leadership Institute (ELI) for Jewish camp directors sponsored by the Foundation for Jewish Camp.

of camp life so that campers, families, and community members will experience Ramah as new, inviting, and challenging.

### **The Changing World of Jewish Camping**

In November 2004 I received a call from a man I had never met. At that time, Jerry Silverman recently had assumed the professional leadership of the Foundation for Jewish Camping. In our first conversation, he bemoaned the lack of serious leadership development for directors of Jewish camps and invited me to join him and Dr. Richard Levin, an executive coach and corporate consultant, in planning a new, cutting-edge leadership program for the directors of residential non-profit Jewish camps. Given my previous involvement with the development of informal Jewish educators, I did not hesitate to accept Jerry's invitation.

In planning for this institute for Jewish camp directors—eventually to be called the Executive Leadership Institute (ELI)—Richard Levin and I interviewed twelve senior Jewish camp executives from a variety of camping movements. As outsiders to the world of camping, we wanted to know how their world was changing and, more specifically, how the role of the camp director has changed over the past decade. Their responses did not vary significantly across movements and helped to shape our own assumptions about the professional development needs of the camp directors who became the ELI Fellows.

The world of Jewish camping in their view has been changing in these dramatic ways:

**Changes in regulation.** If you can remember when you or your parents could drive a large, gas-guzzling car without having to buckle up, you remember the period when camps were relatively free of external regulation. Those times are long gone. Today, whether in relation to the environment, health, or child safety, camps have become highly regulated. With regulation comes new rules, greater complexity, and administrative headaches. Camps must both buckle up and staff up to meet the new codes that define their industry today.

**Changes in families.** Camps always have had to market to families. Children by themselves, after all, do not choose a camp to attend. But there was a time when after choosing a suitable camp, paying the fees, and sending a child off, parents were happy to receive a periodic postcard. No longer. With instant communications come the ever-involved family members who want to know on a daily basis if their Stephanie is having a great time and their Scott has hit that long ball. Paying expensive fees, they feel entitled to know that their child is having the best possible experience each and every day. The camp staff must work much harder to meet those expectations and demands.

**Changes in campers.** Campers have always had childhood problems like homesickness, competition for friends, and heartbreak on the mound. But today's campers carry extra burdens that make their care that much harder. On the medical side, there is the enormous increase in medications that children take today. In the dining room, there are the mushrooming food allergies and alternative diets that must be considered. In the bunk, there are the fears and anxieties that come with less stable family lives and the greater difficulty that this generation has in mastering the social skills to get along with their bunkmates. Kids today are harder to care for, and the camp staff feels these differences because campers live at camp twenty-four hours a day.

**Changes in staff.** Camps have always employed a very young staff to care for children. In that way, camps are like armies—the young lead the young in the campaign to win the battle. But camps find it harder today to compete for the *right* young people to be counselors in the bunks and specialists in various activities. Counselors usually are college students who face their own pressures to earn money and advance their careers. Camps must compete with a larger world of jobs and internships to retain their best staff. And without a mature staff, you cannot run a great camp program.

**Changes in the market.** The lazy, hazy days of summer are a thing of the past. Summer time is now to grow, soar, and see the world. An industry of recreational possibilities has grown up to offer families with means every conceivable summer adventure. Jewish camps are one of many possible offerings and must compete to capture their share of the eligible market. Camps struggle to be attractive, and the old tricks no longer work. Every camp—similar to every private school—is under unrelenting pressure to do better and offer more, just to keep pace with the ever-changing opportunities that Jewish families want for their children.

In brief, the world of camping was once a relatively secure oasis from the pressures of the competitive world; today, competition has entered the front gate, parked on the camp lawn, and announced: I am here to stay. Camping is no longer a Mom and Pop country store, but rather, the rural extension of all one had once hoped to leave behind in the home environment. These changes may have crept in gradually, but now they affect every residential camp. Ramah is no exception.

### **The Changing Role of the Jewish Camp Director**

Each of these major changes in the world of Jewish camping impacts the role of the camp director as the professional leader of the camp. The following is how our informants describe the primary changes in the role of the camp director over the past decade.

### *From leading cowboy to team leader*

A history of senior staffing patterns at Ramah would reveal a clear trend: running a Jewish camp has become as complex an operation as running a day school or a Hillel foundation. Today a camp director does not run the camp directly: he or she directs a staff team that runs the camp. When I think of the direct access I had as a *rosh edah* to my camp director, I am amazed. Today my successor probably reports to an assistant director and a *yo'etz*, positions that did not exist yet at camp during the 1970s. There is also an expanded staff to manage the kitchen, infirmary, and physical plant of the camp.

Leading a larger, more complex staff requires a different set of skills than being the one person in charge. The leader must carefully build a team of senior staff members that work well together and then divide the multiple realms of responsibility among them. The director coordinates and supervises their diverse roles through the rush of the summer weeks. The leader must know when to step in and when to back off and let the team members handle the crises that arise. There is little room any more for the proverbial cowboy who rushes in to save the day. Today the need is for maintaining and updating systems that must run smoothly if this complex operation is to be managed well.

### *From the authority figure to boundary-negotiator with families*

My wife tells the following story from the late 1950s when she and her cousin were campers at a well-known Jewish camp. Her uncle died suddenly of a heart attack one night during that summer. Her mother called the camp director to share the tragic news. In those days there were no answering machines or services. The camp director yelled at her, saying that she had no right to wake him up and that this could wait until morning.

Fortunately, that kind of arrogance is gone from camp life, for the most part. Today camp directors and senior staff recognize that family members are as much their clients as are the campers. They rely on parents to prepare their child for camp and also to communicate all the information the camp requires to take charge of the care of that child. Parents then must trust that the camp will competently care for their child.

Trust is the crux of this relationship, but these days, trust is in shorter supply. Parents are more anxious about the well-being of their child and find it harder to trust the camp authorities. They want more for their child and are never sure if that extra demand is being met. Camp authorities still must set clear boundaries but also must help parents see that their child can thrive in a camp environment many miles from home.

The camp director sets the tone for the communications between the camp and its families. He or she personally can handle only a small fraction of those communications, but often that fraction is the most delicate. Last summer one director shared with me his written communications with a mother whose teenage daughter lost a significant amount of weight over the four-week session. This mother was reasonable and could recognize the many ways the program monitors the health of the camp's teenagers. Yet her daughter had lost weight, and the tension in these communications was palpable. It takes a lot of skill for a director to communicate the required information, express real concern and empathy, and yet show that the camp did all it reasonably could to care for this girl, who despite the camp's attention managed to lose critical weight without detection. The camp director is the last resort for the parent who feels her trust was not sufficiently honored. How these tensions are resolved says a lot to families about the critical trust factor in their relationship to the camp.

### *From managing staff to developing staff*

In most Jewish camps, the educational staff is made up of former campers who have been selected to become staff. Many camps have some form of counselor training and counselor-support systems. By the time a young adult is given responsibility as a bunk counselor or specialist, he or she is usually well-known in the camp community and presumably knows well the values and rules of the camp.

Yet these young adults are still adolescents. They may aim to be responsible counselors, but they also want to enjoy the summertime with their friends. There is a built-in tension between these two desires, and directors report that enjoyment frequently comes at the expense of responsible behavior. Rarely does a summer go by that a director does not have to send home some staff for poor judgment or for breaking camp rules. Sending home a staff member hurts each time.

Even more difficult are the cases where the staff lapse does not involve breaking the rules but indicates a lack of mature capabilities. In one camp I visited, a young adult staff member who had grown up in the camp had asked to be promoted to a new level of responsibility. The camp director was hesitant but finally agreed. As the camp season progressed, the staff member's difficulties in managing younger staff became apparent. The camp director chose to work with her, but she could not keep up, and her unit was suffering. The director knew what he had to do, but it pained him to let go a valued young woman who had grown up in the system.

Jewish camps are intimate communities, and directors are responsible to develop their young staff to become more capable and mature leaders. Yet directors often feel they are put in a position of making demands on young staff that are often not mature enough to assume the required responsibilities. They must inspire and teach, but ultimately directors must know how to balance care for the staff with the demanding needs of running a camp. That balance becomes more difficult each year.

### *From camp leader to community leader*

Camp directors never expect to get much sleep during the summer. One does not last in this job if one cannot tolerate the brutal summer schedule and the very palpable pressures of being the person ultimately responsible for the health and welfare of hundreds of campers and staff all summer long. Most camp directors express a long sigh of relief when the camp season ends.

Tolerating these pressures always has been the hallmark of this profession. What has changed is the other nine months of the year. Whereas in the past camp directors could relax after the summer, today the job has expanded considerably for the reasons cited above, and down time has been reduced to a minimum. Because there are far more regulations to attend to, recruiting campers and staff is more difficult, and the physical plant and camp program require constant updating, the director is busy for much of the year.

As Jewish camping has come to be recognized as a powerful tool for Jewish socialization, camp directors must align their camp more closely with the larger Jewish community. For years camp people sought the proper recognition for the importance of their work. Now that this recognition is at hand, camp directors must become more articulate spokespersons for their mission. They must become community leaders as well as camp leaders.

### *From having boards to developing active boards*

As non-profit organizations, Jewish mission camps have always operated—directly or indirectly—under the supervision of a lay board. However, the role of the lay board has evolved considerably over the past decades. Today, most Jewish camp directors—certainly at Ramah camps—cannot fulfill their professional responsibilities without close coordination with their top lay leaders. No longer is the camp board or committee, as was often true in the past, a rubber stamp for the director's authority.

Camp leaders—much like their professional peers throughout the Jewish community—are rarely prepared for the elaborate partnering required these days for developing and maintaining healthy and effective working relationships

with lay leaders. Professionals tend to see themselves as the experts in their craft—in this case, running camps. Seeing yourself as the expert can make it hard to know how to share your power and authority with lay people who do not have that expertise. Yet that is exactly what this newly activated partnership calls for.

Camp directors express concern about how to manage this new relationship. They know they must have active and involved board members to successfully enter the beckoning realm of major fund-raising. Yet there is confusion about how to develop the right kind of board structure and relationships. There is uncertainty about how to be both the professional leader in charge of camp and the professional partner who consults and learns from the expertise of capable lay leaders who volunteer their time and advice on how to strategically build the camp.

### *From raising funds to engaging in strategic fund-raising*

For many years, non-profit Jewish camps raised money from families and organizations close to the camp. Indeed many camps could never have opened their doors had there not been generous friends willing to offer the needed financial backing to purchase and ready the sites that these camps occupy.

Yet, Jewish camps are entering a new era of fund-raising that earlier camp directors would not have recognized. Due to increasing market pressure to improve facilities and programs that families want for their children, Jewish camps require a new level of financial investment that often cannot be drawn from annual revenue streams. Jewish philanthropists with a sustained interest in the future of these camps are the most likely source of this investment. And those philanthropists are not likely to invest in a camp that is not well-governed by both a competent professional staff and a lay board that exercises true oversight for the operation of the camp.

Taken together, all these changes mean that the old equations of camp leadership no longer work. A camp director can run a great educational program and have a terrific team in place to internally manage the camp operation. But if that director does not have his or her finger on the pulse of the market and the full trust of an active board that partners in developing a strategically sustainable fund-raising campaign, that camp is not likely to thrive in the decade ahead.

### *Ramah and the role of the professional camp leader*

Given all these changes, when thinking specifically about Ramah at 60, I begin with these two questions:

1. How can a camping movement like Ramah remain true to its animating educational vision and yet successfully meet all the considerable challenges that arise from the changing world of Jewish camping?

2. How can a camping movement like Ramah develop and nurture professional camp leaders who together with their lay leaders guide their camps toward a successful future while managing all the new pressures and expectations that now define the role of the camp director?

I view these two questions as integrally linked. In the case of Ramah, educational vision and camp leadership are meant to be two sides of a single coin. The camp director is the individual who most clearly embodies the educational philosophy of Ramah. Yet given all the changes in the world of camping and in the role of the camp leader, we must ask: How can a Ramah camp director today be expected to accomplish, with professional integrity, all the accumulating demands that define his or her position? Is it not imperative for this movement to be asking itself if its traditional understanding of the role of the camp leader must be overhauled?

In looking at the recent history of Ramah, I see that this crisis in professional leadership is not a new phenomenon. At the end of *Ramah Reflections at 50: Visions for a New Century* (Dorph 2000), we find the list of all the camp directors of the Ramah camps from 1947 to 1999. What is striking to me is that from 1969 to 1999 in many of the residential camps there was a rapid turnover in professional leadership. It does not take a Harvard leadership consultant to tell us that Ramah as a movement cannot sustain its lofty educational vision if it does not get a firm handle on how to prepare, supervise, and nurture leaders who can give their camps the stable and sustaining leadership a camp requires to grow and flourish.

### *A look back at the history of Ramah*

Although not much has been written specifically about the historical role of the Ramah camp director, we can infer from what has been written about the mission of Ramah how the early leaders of this movement viewed the role of the camp leader. I will focus in particular on the writings of the late Seymour Fox who in the late 1950s and the 1960s functioned as the leader and spokesperson for the movement.

Fox presents a rich set of ideas about the educational mission of Ramah. He explicitly claims that Ramah should not be thought of as primarily a camp, but as “an educational institution.”

The leadership of Ramah hoped to create an educational subculture that was more than a school, more than a youth movement, and more than a camp. . . . This [camp] setting was chosen because it offered more time. Ideas,



programs and activities could be developed without the constraints of the rigorous school schedule. . . . It was favored because the educator as a role model in this setting meant something very different than the educator as a role model in the school or youth movement. Here one could observe the educator as he himself grappled with ideas, considered alternative lifestyles and succeeded or failed in these endeavors. (1989, 19–20)

Fox and his colleagues envisioned Ramah as a *vast stage* on which Jewish educators could bring to life an exciting alternative Jewish universe. They created a legacy of Ramah as a unique Jewish educational environment through which significant Jewish ideas and experiences could be presented to and impressed upon both campers and staff members. Indeed, I am one of many young Jews whose direction in life was inspired by the summers I spent at Ramah in the 1960s.

Note that Fox refers to “the educator as a role model.” I do not know if he had the camp director specifically in mind, but Fox consistently thought of camp leaders as educators and role models. That model emphasizes his view—as we see below—that everything that happens at camp must be viewed through an educational prism: how will this or that administrative decision be viewed by staff and campers as reflecting the core values of the camp?

That is a powerful question, but also a limiting one. Its power comes from the vision of Ramah as an alternative Jewish universe in which all aspects of camp life are meant to reflect a sustaining Jewish vision of the good life. But it is also limiting because it fails to recognize that camps are also very much part of the ongoing mundane world in which vision is not the only value consideration that must be weighed. In this essay, I try to honor the power of Fox’s traditional vision of Ramah and yet suggest an alternative perspective that recognizes that vision must be weighed against other countervailing forces that call for change and revision.

### **Fox: The Role of Vision at Ramah**

In 1997, many years after he had left his active involvement with Ramah, Seymour Fox together with William Novak published *Vision at the Heart*, a reflective piece that included an essay called “Lessons from Camp Ramah on the Power of Ideas in Shaping an Educational Institution.” This essay represents the clearest statement of how this legendary figure envisioned the Ramah mission and the tasks of leadership within this context.

“There is nothing as practical as a great idea” is the opening line and theme of this essay. Ramah’s greatness lies in its big ideas. Before there were camps, there were big ideas on which to base these camps.

Ramah emerged out of an ambitious dream, a carefully considered ideal of educational possibilities. Big questions were asked: What kind of Jews, what kind of people, do we want to nurture? What ideas will guide this new camp? What happens when compelling but conflicting philosophies about the meaning and purpose of Jewish life must coexist in one institution? How can Judaism be transmitted to children and to teenagers as vital, engaging, and necessary?

Fox offers this creation myth to press his major point that what make an educational endeavor great are the ideas that it embodies. Educational institutions are not merely social arrangements that at a given moment people create to meet certain social and cultural needs. Ramah was not simply the product of the emerging Conservative Movement after the war years that required a more encompassing educational environment than its synagogue schools and youth movements could provide. These institutional imperatives, in Fox's view, were the backdrop to the opening of these camps. These camps *became* Ramah. They ascended to their intended heights when, through their leadership, they intentionally seized this historic opportunity to fashion themselves in the image of a number of compelling ideas.

Fox spells out what those compelling ideas are and lauds the unique relationship between Ramah and The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) that nurtured this creative process of ideas informing practice and practice informing ideas. He looks back at those formative years as defining Ramah as a movement and identifies both the core purpose and core values of this movement.

The purpose of Ramah in its largest sense is “to create an educational setting where young people will be able to discover their Judaism and learn how to live it in their daily lives . . . deeply committed to their tradition and actively involved in American society” (Fox 1997, 10).

The core values (Fox 1997, 13–17) that give definition to what it means “to live their Judaism in their daily lives” are:

- engaging with Jewish texts.
- being involved with prayer and spiritual life.
- exploring music, art, and drama as legitimate religious expressions.
- mastering Hebrew.
- becoming active and responsible citizens guided by the principles of Judaism.

Fox links each of these core values to the thinking of a particular professor at JTS. For example, he claims that Ramah's core value of prayer and spirituality was deeply influenced by the ideas of Abraham Joshua Heschel. Prayer at Ramah is not simply the practice of daily minyan supplemented by *kabbalat shabbat* at the lake. “What *tefillah* (prayer) meant at Ramah was deeply

influenced by Heschel and his students, including the concept of *kaavanah* (devotional intention) and the idea of *tefillah* as an opportunity for contemplation and self-improvement” (Fox 1997, 16). As this example illustrates, Fox views these core values as derived from great ideas that elevate their meaning to a level of philosophic significance and make Ramah a compelling educational experiment.

### **Vision and Leadership at Ramah**

When the “Lessons from Camp Ramah” essay was published, I thought Fox had captured important truths about Ramah in its first generation and had left us with much to think about the ongoing role of vision and ideas in Jewish education. However, recently I started to wonder what this essay tells us about leadership at Ramah. I believe that in Fox’s view, the primary role of Ramah’s professional leaders is to mediate the realms of ideas and practice and to take compelling ideas and translate them into enduring educational practices that define much of the camp program.

Support for this position can be found in a subsequent publication in which Fox is more explicit about the role of the principal in a school.

If the principal is not encouraging, supporting and leading the school in the translation of the vision’s ideas into day-to-day practice, the school will drift, its teachers will lose their focus, and students and parents will be denied the excitement of an education whose details are designed to offer them both discernment and meaning.

Equally, if those responsible for administering a school are not partners to the vision and full participants in actualizing its aspirations, then the vision is likely to deteriorate into slogans, rather than being rooted in the real life of the school. The means of education are not neutral, whether they involve school discipline, a school’s policy on scholarships or the job description of a new secretary. . . . The environment of a school—its ‘oxygen’—is determined by the commitment of the entire staff. (Fox 2003, 270)

Fox is making two key points that are highly relevant to camp leadership as well:

1. Both children and adults in an educational system look toward the leaders to point the way and answer: Why are we here and what are we engaged in doing together? If the leaders are themselves not clear on a direction and purpose or are unable to communicate those to others, then the direction will drift, purpose will atrophy.

2. Purpose and direction—what Fox calls vision—must inform all aspects of the shared life. If the camp program (what the educational staff

is responsible for) and the camp environment (what the business staff is responsible for) do not mesh, everyone eventually will feel the gap and doubt the camp's seriousness of purpose. You cannot teach about justice in your lessons and treat your maintenance staff unfairly.

These two points taken together explain why Fox insisted that the Ramah camp director must be a Jewish educator: for that leader must both understand and embody the big ideas that *are* Ramah and translate those ideas into every aspect of camp life—from how campers are treated in the bunk to how the camp processes its sewage or contracts with its kitchen staff.

### **Built to Last**

Several years ago I visited Camp Ramah in Wisconsin as part of a research team. I had never been to this Ramah, and what I observed was truly impressive. This visit started me thinking seriously again about Ramah as a summer camp. My research partner, Max Klau, suggested that to understand what we saw there, I needed to read a business book called *Built to Last* by James Collins and Jerry Porras (2002). Max's suggestion would prove pivotal to my own rethinking of the place of vision in today's world of Jewish camping.

Collins and Porras write about American corporations that both have lasted a long time and have outperformed their peer companies in terms of long-term earnings. These are Fortune 500 companies that have proven their enduring value over successive generations. The authors are interested in these companies as exemplars of excellence over time. Through a sophisticated research design, they investigated the characteristics that distinguish these companies from their competitors who also have lasted over time but have not succeeded to the same extent in financial terms.

What surprised me is that these authors also are interested in the role that vision plays in helping to create and sustain a highly successful company. They, like Fox, said that to understand why a single organization stands out among its peers as an exemplar of excellence over several generations, you must take into account, among other factors, the way values and purpose figure in their operating principles. But Collins and Porras have a very different take on vision than Fox had.

Whereas Fox is singularly focused on whether an educational institution is guided by a compelling vision, these authors view vision—which they carefully define—as only half the equation for success over time. In their view, what successful organizations must balance is a fidelity to enduring values and purpose, as well as an eager willingness to change anything that serves as a means to realizing those core values and purpose.

The fundamental distinguishing characteristic of the most enduring and successful corporations is that they preserve a cherished core ideology while simultaneously stimulating progress and change in everything that is not part of their core ideology. Put another way, they distinguish their timeless core values and enduring core purpose (which should never change) from their operating principles and business strategies (which should be changing constantly in response to a changing world). . . . They understand the difference between what is truly sacred and what is not. And by being clear about what should never change, they are better able to stimulate change and progress in everything else. (Collins and Porras 2002, 220)

In their view, a vision is not simply a set of ideas that defines this organization's core values and enduring purposes. Rather,

A good vision builds on the interplay between these two complementary yin-and-yang forces: it defines 'what we stand for and why we exist' that does not change (core ideology) and sets forth 'what we aspire to become, to achieve, to create' that will require significant change and progress to attain (the envisioned future). (Collins and Porras 2002, 221)

By focusing on this ying/yang polarity, these authors offer a key insight. As important as it is for Ramah to be clear about and true to its core ideology, it is equally vital to clarify what is *not core* and hence, what is changeable. What is required to promote enduring progress is not only fidelity to a defining ideology, but also a liberation from unspoken loyalties to particulars of the educational program and ways of doing business that are *not core* to Ramah's values and purpose.

Collins and Porras lead us to realize that if an organization like Ramah wishes to be seriously faithful to its core ideology and also be successful in today's world, its leaders must rigorously ask themselves: Are we currently best positioned to realize our core values and purposes? The likely answer will be that they are *not* best positioned because they are holding on to past arrangements that once seemed essential, but that today may function as barriers to future success. Indeed, not rigorously examining what must change will undermine the organization's fidelity to its principles because inefficient means dull the impact of those principles. Even the greatest idea will seem uninspiring if presented in ways that seem cumbersome and dated.

### **Who Defines the Vision of a Camp?**

Following Collins and Porras, I am arguing that Ramah's leaders today face the dual task of renewing the core values and purpose of this movement *and* asking very hard questions about whether the camps are well positioned to deliver that vision-inspired program to today's changing clientele.

But who defines what the core values and purpose of a camp are? If these are to be the camp's guiding stars, were they set in the organizational firmament years ago and are they permanently set?

In Fox's view, Ramah is one of the few educational enterprises whose founders were deliberate about setting out both purpose and core values. They did so with great thought and deliberation and with a keen sense of what Ramah's unique contribution should be. In his view, their pioneering work should still be the guiding star; these are the values that make Ramah what it is. Fox cannot imagine a Ramah camp that did not take these values and purpose as fundamental. That does not mean that these values are not open to differing interpretations and expressions or that the past is the final word on core values. But Fox does not imagine that these values will go out of fashion or become irrelevant. In that sense, he views these as core and unchanging.

Collins and Porras also cite many cases in which a company's core purpose and values were established by the founding generation. But they also warn that it is very easy to confuse core values and cultural norms. Just because "we have always done it this way" does not mean that a given practice reflects a core value. To help sort out what are truly core values, they ask organizational leaders hard questions like:

- Can you imagine these core values being equally valid 100 years from now?
- Would you hold these values even if at some point they became a competitive disadvantage?
- If you were to start a new organization tomorrow, would you still build in these as the core values?

I imagine Fox would have answered each of these in the affirmative. But I am less sure that would be true for all or most Ramah leaders today. Indeed, it may be very important to be raising these kinds of questions to discover if there remains a consensus among the lay and professional leaders as to what is core and unchangeable, and what should be viewed as cultural norms that developed over time but could be changed to make Ramah a more effective modality for educating today's campers and families.

### **Does Ramah Have the Right People on the Bus?**

Where Collins and Porras differ most dramatically from Fox is on the question of what comes first in building a successful organization. Fox identifies big ideas as the first element that forms the basis for a vision of excellence. Collins and Porras place primary emphasis on getting "the right people on the bus" and building a solid work structure and discipline that will allow those people

to flourish together. In their view, the vision emerges from having the right people working together rather than the other way around.

Over the last twenty to twenty-five years, there has been a clear correlation between continuity in leadership and overall camp success on both the educational and managerial levels. At times there were periods of considerable instability at the director level at Ramah camps. In fairness, instability also has characterized the leadership of other sectors of North American Jewish education. Ramah does not stand alone in this regard, and in the past few years there has been more stable leadership in Ramah. Nevertheless, the hard questions about leadership are not limited to stability. They include what type of leadership these camps will require to grow and prosper by contemporary standards of camping excellence in today's changing world.

Getting the right people on and the wrong people off the bus is a complex matter. I am not sure that a simple formula such as "Ramah camps need to be led by Jewish educators" can guide the thinking required for preparing Ramah's future leaders today. For as Collins makes clear, there is no objective measure of who is "right" or "wrong" for a given organization. The right people are those who will fit the ethos and culture of the organization and whose work style best matches what this particular organization expects and requires of its leaders. At Ramah the question of who is right is made more complicated by the regional differences among the camps and by the differing demands that the various local boards of directors have placed on the directors whom they have a hand in selecting and evaluating. Ramah must not rely on a "one size fits all" formula for selecting and developing their camp directors.

Some Ramah directors have told me that they feel caught in a cross fire between the traditional vision of Ramah as a Jewish educational institution and the demands of local board members that they run their camps by the standards of an efficient business. I doubt that these cross pressures are a new development, but these pressures grow more acute with the changes we have described in the world of Jewish camping. Indeed, I am convinced that these cross pressures will continue to weigh heavily on the Ramah camp directors and will necessitate a rethinking of the traditional definitions of what skills will be required in the future to be a successful director of a camp.

Although I cannot answer who are the right professionals to lead the Ramah camps into their future, I can share what we have been learning through ELI about what it takes in today's changing world of Jewish camping to become a successful camp professional leader. This contribution is necessarily speculative as it is based on but one year of intensive work with our nineteen Jewish camp directors from around North America. It also is not specific to the needs of Ramah camps. Nevertheless, these observations may serve as a

beginning for a much longer inquiry into who are the right leaders for the Ramah of the future.

### **What Skills Will Future Camp Leaders Need?**

Through conversations over several years with both professional and lay leaders of Jewish residential camps, and in intensive seminars over a period of a year with nineteen Jewish camp directors from the many movements, Richard Levin and I came up with a list of five clusters of professional skills that we think are essential for successful professional camp leadership in today's changing world of camping.

#### *Communicating a compelling story*

Ramah always has prided itself on delivering this powerful message: Some camps can make all the difference for your child and family. Some camps can be transformative; Ramah camps can be Jewishly transformative.

The problem with that message today is that many Jewish venues claim to be transformative. So what makes Ramah special?

Answering that question via a compelling story is a first essential skill for a camp director. By "story" we mean a multi-media narrative that incisively tells both outsiders and insiders what makes this camp a very special place. It sums up in a few words and images what people uniquely love about this place. With color, verve, and emotion, the story illustrates what this camp contributes to people's lives—in the case of Ramah—how this camp enriches their Jewish lives.

Today's camp leader must be an authentic storyteller with great versatility. There is a story that works for recruiting new families and staff. But there are other versions for recruiting board members, building communal support, and engaging donors. This camp story has many versions but must convey a consistent message: the vision of the leadership for this camp; not only what the camp is today, but what it can become tomorrow.

This story ultimately is a love story, and the camp leader is its bard.

#### *Managing complexity*

I visited a camp leader this summer who was dealing with all of the following issues at once while also running the camp:

1. The assistant director had announced he would be leaving after the summer.
2. A seasoned professional on her staff was accused by another staff member of theft.



3. The groundskeeper was not working at the same level of consistency or effectiveness as in past years.

4. The parent organization had just appointed a new executive who had to be educated about the camp's role in that organization.

5. The chair of the camp board was urging caution in what the director would say to that new executive.

6. This director recently had given birth to a child and also was dealing with balancing home and work issues.

There was nothing particularly unusual about this situation; this was not a crisis situation. This visit brought home that today's camp leader must be a master juggler who is at ease balancing a lot of different balls in the air at once.

I contend that camp life has grown far more complex, and this trend has major implications for who can succeed today in the role of a camp leader. Camp leadership requires a high degree of face-to-face interaction with staff, families, campers, and community members. The role calls for that unusual combination of a leader who is a talented communicator but can also step back and deal with a lot of small details and pressures that could overwhelm others.

The camp directors I most admire exhibit the capacity to be totally immersed in the daily concerns of camp life while also reserving space in their brains to dream the big dream of what this camp can become. They master the complexity while never forgetting that camp is about something much larger than the details themselves.

### *Leading by delegating and inspiring*

With complexity comes the requirement to lead by delegating and inspiring. Camps appoint a single leader, but that leader inevitably leads by building the team that shares the leadership tasks. The quality of that team tells a lot about the quality of that leader.

It is never easy sharing power and authority. Yet that is exactly what camp leaders must do today. They must invest young people with the responsibility and authority to lead units within the camp in accordance with the vision of the camp. Young people can succeed at this only when they are part of a team that cares for them, nurtures their talents, offers critical feedback, and stands behind them when the going gets tough. Camp leaders who create such teams reap the rewards of shared power and responsibility. But with talented people in short supply, camp leaders always are struggling to put together teams that will work well and last beyond a single season.

A successful camp leader today relies on a lot of different experts who in other contexts would not be working under the same roof. How the

leader manages their input, inspires their commitment, and orchestrates their diverse contributions tells a lot about the health of that camp as a cohesive organization.

### *Educating and learning at every level*

The vision of the camp guides its leaders to what they are aiming to achieve, but only their social and emotional intelligence—their capacity to learn from all levels of this business—allows them to adapt their operations to achieve a maximally successful camp organization.

The best camp leaders today are constantly educating others on the vision (core purpose and values) of this camp. But at the same time, they are constantly learning from others how best to achieve that vision. Who are those camp leaders learning from? The answer is they are learning primarily from the following key stakeholders:

- Campers and families have much to teach about the current market and the emerging needs of children and their families today.
- Educational staff members have much to teach about the daily operations—what works or does not work in the bunks, on the playing fields, around the swimming place, and in the creative spaces for the arts and spiritual practice.
- Administrative staff members have much to teach about operating the systems that allow the camp to manage the grounds, the dining hall, the infirmary, and interactions with the surrounding world.
- Board members have much to teach about the financial health of the camp, its place in the larger Jewish community, and its strategic growth possibilities.
- Rabbis and educators in the communities have much to teach about how the camp aligns with the larger movement—the synagogues and schools—that also serve this constituency.

All these stakeholders may not be aware of how much they have to teach the camp director until he opens the doors of communications with them. But having the skills to build these networks, tap the knowledge base of these stakeholders, and know how to use their knowledge to draw a map of the camp's opportunities and challenges are key leadership skills for future camp directors.

### *Planning and effecting change*

Camps are dynamic operations. Camp leaders must have their fingers on the pulse of the camping market, on how other camps are innovating, and on what is emerging as best practice in Jewish experiential education. They must be constantly thinking: How can we make this a better camp operation—better in serving its clientele and better in realizing its core vision?

No camp director can bring about ongoing change and improvement alone. Effective change inevitably involves all the key stakeholders. The best camp leaders today do not simply envision change and seek support for their envisioned project. Rather, they reach out to others, learn from them, and use that input to plan change that will gain wider support. When people hear a compelling story for why an envisioned change is required, they are moved to support the change because it speaks to them as partners in the destiny of this camp.

A camp leader who learns to listen and collaborate with key stakeholders and knows how to make proposed changes happen with adequate financial and communal support will be able to lead her camp into a successful future.

### **The Future Leaders of Ramah**

Although I agree with Fox that the Ramah camp director must embody the Ramah vision and know how to translate that vision into camp practices that involve all the camp's staff, I want to conclude by suggesting an expanded version of the camp director as educator. I am referring to an educator who knows not only how to embody a vision but also to ask the tough questions that Collins and Porras insist are required to successfully lead an organization in our times.

The problem with having pride and confidence in a long-standing vision is that it can generate a sense of certainty and even an unbending attachment to past truths and practices. In the case of Ramah, the pride in its Jewish educational mission can become a certainty that we know best how to run our camps, and any substantive suggestion for change can be interpreted as a retreat from the standards of Ramah. Fox's call to embody an established vision can become a defensive stance in the face of calls for adaptive change.

In this paper I am calling on Ramah's professional leaders to adopt a different stance in relation to the vision of Ramah. Rather than thinking in "either-or" terms, it is advisable to think in "both-and" terms. Instead of believing that Ramah must stick to that established vision *or else* Ramah will cease to be true to its Jewish educational principles, I suggest that leaders can be both true to the Ramah vision *and* open to investigating how best to realize

that vision in our day. They can be open to the possibility that not every established educational practice is necessarily still an effective means for realizing that vision and that the director may need to adapt a learner's perspective in relation to input from key stakeholders.

I have learned from Collins and Porras that when leaders become overly confident in the established practices of their organization, they invite inevitable decline. Collins and Porras advocate a dual-mindedness in leaders that I suggest is apt for Ramah at 60. Leaders must have full confidence in the purpose and core values of their organization *and* radical uncertainty as to whether the organization is actually well-aligned to best accomplish that vision and those goals.

In the fall of 2007, the New England Patriots enjoyed unprecedented success in the regular professional football season. Their win-loss record was 16–0, and they broke a number of records for offense. Yet in the pages of the *Boston Globe*, I read that their coach, Bill Belichick, assessed his team's efforts each week in terms of where the team needed to improve. He was obsessively concerned with what did *not* go as well as it could even when the team had yet to lose a game. Belichick embodies the kind of leader that Collins and Porras admire: he is eager to ask the hard questions even in the face of a natural tendency to feel confident and coast with the team's success.

In contrast, I have been at Ramah—as well as other Jewish camps—where the director has told me privately that he does not have full confidence in his senior staff and no longer believes that key camp programs are at the quality level that he expects. It is urgent that these camp leaders ask the hard questions of what can we do to constantly improve the quality of our staff and programs. There have been some great examples of innovative leadership at Ramah in the past two decades. However, I also think there has been some coasting and complacency in the face of the admittedly very difficult task of insisting upon excellence.

There also have been recent occasions when Ramah directors were taken to task by board members for not consistently managing the camp systems at a level of business excellence. Michael Brown reports that questions of managerial accountability have existed for several decades in the Ramah system (Brown 2000). Ramah directors are consistently asked to manage the complexity of the business operation with the same dedication and skill as they manage the camp's educational programs. Their success in balancing these goals will continue to be crucial to Ramah's ongoing success.

What is required is a different understanding of what it means today that a Ramah camp director should be a Jewish educator. There remains the essential demand that Ramah camp directors live the life of a committed

Conservative Jew and be schooled in the fundamentals of contemporary Jewish educational theory and practice. But there must be the added dimension of the educator as adult learner. Ramah directors today require the humility to recognize that they probably do *not* bring all the skills and knowledge they need to run an excellent summer camp. As a result they must be on a continuous learning curve to achieve both self and organizational improvement. They can find teachers at JTS and other institutions of higher learning but also at camping conferences, management workshops, and private meetings with board members, local rabbis, and interested lay advisors. The key is to realize that to be an educator today, a camp leader must constantly be learning and growing as a Jew and a professional leader.

It has been clear for some time that there cannot and must not be any dichotomy between being a serious Jewish educator and a dedicated manager-leader. There is no room for Ramah directors to take refuge in the seriousness of their educational vision at the expense of managerial competence and leadership capacities. Camp directors, just as school principals and congregational rabbis, must be expected to have expertise on both ends of this continuum. That is asking a lot of our professional leaders; it is the mandate of all who care about Jewish camping to support these leaders in their pursuit of excellence in both educating and learning.

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