



A former synagogue president reflects on member engagement

By Arlene Bryer

As president of Temple Aliyah, a Conservative synagogue in Needham, MA, from 2019-2021, member engagement was one of my top priorities.

Engagement is an overwhelming topic for synagogue presidents. How do you even begin to start engaging with members at a new and deeper level? It's too much to think about especially when, as president, you have so much more pressing things to do and only two years to do it all! My suggestion is that member engagement is one of the most important things you can do, and one that will reap benefits that are both obvious but also some less transparent.

I would like to share what I decided to do the year prior to taking on the role of president at my temple.

Let me preface this by saying that I love engaging with people – whether it's in an elevator, at a friend's BBQ or at my synagogue's kiddush. I know this doesn't come naturally to all but if you take on the responsibility of temple president, you need to push yourself into this discomfort zone.

When I became president-elect, I decided that the best way for me to prepare both personally and professionally was to reach out to the oldest and/or longest members to get together for a coffee and conversation. I had two goals in mind:

For me to get to know them better; what's important to them, what do we need to improve on and to discover any potential philanthropic opportunities.

And for them to get to know me better, and to gain their trust, which I believe was very important for my success given their longevity and their longtime support

Here is the way I went about it:

I connected with a long-term founding member and shared my idea. He whole heartedly supported it and preceded to provide a list of the top fifty members/couples that he felt I should reach out to.

In my opening telephone conversation, I told the member(s) what I was doing, and why I wanted to meet them – that I just wanted to have a discussion, get to know them better and for them to get to know me, what they like or have concerns about in our shul, what they wished we offered. And most importantly that I wouldn't be asking them for anything!

I would set a time and place that works for them – in their house, at a local coffee shop and when COVID entered our lives – on Zoom (or outside).

I indicated that it would be for an hour max and then I would stick to that time limit. Ten minutes left before the end, I would state that we only had ten minutes left if there was anything that they would still like to share with me.

When I met with them, I would tell them that I'm going to be taking notes and that I will not share anything unless they give me permission. I let them know who I would be sharing it with (before I was president I shared it with the rabbi, cantor, VP membership and president. If they had any comments, positive or concern about a particular staff member, again I would ask their permission and then pass that along).

I would start out by asking them about them; where they are from/born, how they met, their kids, their occupations, what involvement they have had at our synagogue, what leadership roles, if any, that they have held. What they like or don't like about our shul, what are we missing, and what else could we be offering? It is also an excellent opportunity to personally thank these members for their membership and all their support over the past many years.

Then I would tell them about myself, where I'm from, my family, my background and why I decided to become president and take on that responsibility (which gives you an opportunity to inspire and reinforce your synagogues value).

Afterwards, I would send an email, thanking them for taking the time to meet with me and I would repeat anything that they asked me to follow up on and then, of course, I would make a note to circle back to follow up on it.

Finally I would write up and send summary of all the information provided (and have permission to share) with those who I said I would share with. If you have a database, enter all permissible info under their member contact.

My goal was to connect with one member/couple a week (excluding summer). In that first year I met, in person, with twenty-eight members/couples plus approximately 6 new members and 3 potential members (all of whom became members because of this interaction).

I cannot express enough how important this project has been for me as president and how much it resonated with those I met. Many said to me "I've been a member for X years and this is the first time a president has reached out to meet with me to just talk." Taking time to meet with them showed them that they still mattered, that they were valued.

It also provides excellent future philanthropic opportunities. For example, while you're in conversation with "Joe Shapiro" and he says that he's very interested in Jewish education for youth, the next time you have a project that needs funding in that area, you can circle back to Joe and remind him of what he shared with you and ask if he would help fund X project. The relationships you build make it easier to have these kinds of conversations with your members. When I decided to do a December match to help close my high holiday appeal, I already had these relationships in place to have conversations with members about providing matching funds for a challenge.

Although I continued this exercise when I became president, with COVID and all the demands of having to pivot, I still met some members outside, but my meetings dropped as Zoom didn't seem to have the same impact. Instead, during COVID, I took the time to follow up with members on their surgeries and illnesses, to wish them mazel tov on a new baby or a wedding. I also instilled programming that engage like "Friday night services/dinner on Zoom," a Zoom musical presentation with members who are musicians, trivia night, etc. I cannot state strongly enough how important it is for members to feel valued, to know they are 'important' enough for you to take the time to reach out to them. All it takes is a quick phone call.

I was fortunate to have the time to have incorporated this project into my schedule but regardless, I truly believe it is worthwhile to adopt this project and set yourself a goal; whether it's one member/couple a week or one a month, it's worth your time. The investment you make before your presidency and continue to do during your tenure, will pay off to the benefit of the synagogue that you love, in both measurable and immeasurable ways for years to come.

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