



The Nonprofit Imagineers

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USCJ Board Study Guide

Discount ordering information:

Introduction: Although *The Nonprofit Imagineers* is presented in a light, casual, and often fictional format, it covers serious topics and provides guidance for addressing challenges that many synagogues struggle with when trying to think outside the box. This study guide was developed for synagogue Boards to facilitate conversations that will help stretch creative muscles and think like Dreamers.

We recommend that you form a book group with your fellow board members, read *The Nonprofit Imagineers* one chapter at a time, and meet on a regular basis to discuss what you read.

You don't need to answer every question. Pick a few from each chapter that will create the most engagement, encourage the most critical thinking, or are most appropriate given challenges you are currently dealing with. It might help to provide these questions to everyone in your group ahead of time so that they can prepare. You might even want to ask a different member of your group to be the discussion leader or presenter for each session.

Chapter 1: Removing Limitations

- Take a moment to look at your synagogue's mission statement. Is it too specific to allow you to adapt to the changing world and meet the needs of the next generation of Jews? What changes might you make to prepare for the future?
- Have there been times where you noticed that a large campaign or event that was being organized by multiple staff members or volunteers seemed to lack cohesion? How might establishing a creative intent have helped?
- Identify a few things from your synagogue's past that were the victim of "creative destruction." Are you better off now that they have been replaced? What challenges did you face in replacing them? How did you overcome those challenges?
- Name 3 things your synagogue currently does simply because it's "the way you've always done things". If you were starting fresh today, as a brand new synagogue with no institutional memory, what would you do differently?

Chapter 2: Addressing Concerns

- What was a recent risk your congregation took on a new idea that failed? What (if anything) were the consequences of that failure? What (if anything) did that failure lead to? For example, a creative new fundraising capital campaign might have failed to raise the amount necessary to begin the project, and resulted in uncomfortable conversations with donors who were excited to contribute and see changes happen on campus. Ultimately, the funds from that failed campaign might have been used for a different project with an important impact, or the creative fundraising idea might have been adjusted to become a successful campaign later on.
- What are some big ideas your congregation has been hoping to accomplish all at once, that might be more successful if done as small, incremental advancements toward an ultimate goal?
- Without naming any names, think about big donors or steadfast supporters who might be averse to change. What are some strategies you might use to win them over?
- If your synagogue was going to attempt a “skunkworks” to create a new program outside of your current mission - one that will benefit the community, and ultimately benefit your synagogue - what would that program be?
- Have you ever faced resistance to change from a board or senior leadership team member? How did you approach the situation? Was the outcome positive or negative? What might you do differently next time?

Chapter 3: The Truth about “Innovation”

- What is the most innovative thing your congregation has done during the time that you have been there? Was it the result of a bold, revolutionary new idea, or a small change that had a lasting impact?
- What are you working on now that you hope, after a few more iterations, will be considered innovative or become a true Innovation? What are those next steps and how can your board or staff help achieve them?
- How has the pandemic changed the way your synagogue operates for the good? How can those positive changes be taken to the next level?
- Judaism is built on tradition, and certain things must remain consistent in order to retain the essence of who we are. Has your synagogue tried to make changes that failed because they went too strongly against tradition? What was the intent behind that change, and what might have been done differently to be more successful?
- What is the difference between innovation and improvement? Can you think of examples of problems or shortcomings that exist at your synagogue that would benefit from fresh, innovative thinking rather than simply making improvements?

Chapter 4: Finding New Ideas Through Blue Sky Dreaming

- Can you think of a few ideas from the recent past that benefited from collaboration and discussion among a diverse group of people? Conversely, can you think of a few ideas that went wrong, in part, because a diverse group of people were not included in the conversation?

- What role do you play in blue sky dreaming at your organization, whether it be a dreamer or a supporter of dreamers? What can you do to encourage more dreaming?
- Can you think of a situation where a new idea was shot down before giving it a chance? How might you handle the situation differently next time?
- What was the last problem your synagogue staff or lay leaders solved creatively? What role did blue sky brainstorming and dreaming play in the development of that solution?
- If you could add something completely new to your synagogue, whether it be a physical space, new audience/demographic, or new type of program, what would it be? Ask a few “What if...” questions to expand your dreaming. For example: “What if we had the money to develop that unused acre of land?” *We could build a gym!* “What if we built a gym?” *We can host a neighborhood basketball league and bring in people who wouldn’t be on campus otherwise!* “What if we had lots of new people on our campus?” *We could...*

Chapter 5: Connecting with a Story

- Think of a past campaign that used a story to form a connection between your congregants and your synagogue. In what ways did story help in its success? If you can’t think of any examples, think back to a campaign that could have benefited from the inclusion of story elements. How might you have adjusted that campaign to use story as a form of connection?
- Does your synagogue use themes to connect fundraising campaigns, programs and holidays? If so, do you feel it makes a difference? What could be done to make the theme more meaningful?
- How would your synagogue benefit from the idea of “chapters” in your story? Does it ever feel like things fizzle out rather than coming to decisive conclusions? Does it ever feel like fundraising campaigns or major events overlap and end up detracting from one another because they are not kept in separate “chapters”?
- Look through your website, brochure, or other marketing materials. Does the concept of challenges, guides and heroes come into play? How might these materials be edited to form a greater connection between your congregants and your synagogue?

Chapter 6: Imagineering Principles

- Imagine walking through your synagogue. How might Kinetics or Weenies be used to make your physical space more vibrant and inviting?
- What are some of the noteworthy things that you would like to spotlight for new and existing members using the concept of Forced Perspective? Look through your website or promotional materials and discuss how wording or visuals might be adjusted to highlight those items.
- Pick an upcoming event and discuss how environmental storytelling can be used in promoting the event to reach more audiences and have more impact.

- What are 5 things that could be done this week to improve (“plus”) your facility or a program without requiring much effort or expense?

Chapter 7: Yes, But How Do We Actually Do It?

- How can the concept of "beta testing" be used at your synagogue to promote new ideas? What is an example of a new program that you've tried in the past that might have benefitted from first being released as a “Beta”? How might the outcome have been different?
- Who are some of your synagogue's competitors and/or role models that you might not already be thinking about when planning events, fundraising campaigns or marketing? What can you learn from them?
- What are some ways that your synagogue is too focused on technology? What are some things that are currently hi-tech that can be turned into hi-touch moments without significant time or financial investment?
- When thinking about the 70-20-10 model, what are some ideas that used to be in the “10% zone” and have moved into the 70% zone as they become more mainstream? What are some ideas that are currently still in the 10% zone? What can you do to help cultivate them?
- What are some of your favorite low-cost, high-impact projects from the past few years at your synagogue? What made those projects stand out? What lessons can you learn and carry forward to new projects to make them as impactful as possible without adding to the price tag?

Chapter 8: Did I Ever Tell You You're My Hero?

- What are some ways to help your board or staff manage expectations so that they don't get too fatigued or overwhelmed in creative endeavors?
- How important is self care and professional development? What can be done to ensure staff members are taken care of and feel motivated and enthusiastic about being at work?
- Are you currently a member of any groups that extend beyond your synagogue, in which you can share ideas and learn from others? What sorts of ideas are discussed that address issues on a community-wide or global level, rather than just at individual organization levels?
- How often do you re-evaluate your synagogue's goals? Do you tend to keep goals static until they are accomplished, or do you adjust those goals so that you constantly have something to strive for? Are there any goals currently within reach that should be adjusted now that you've nearly reached them?

Your first Sulam for Imagineers assignment - Let's Bluesky for Problems!

Now that you've completed *The Nonprofit Imagineers* and understand that innovative change often starts by identifying problems to solve, it's time to prepare for the next leg of your creative journey by brainstorming for problems.

This activity is best done in person, however, websites like miro.com can be used to brainstorm virtually. Please provide participants with the instructions ahead of time so that they can begin brainstorming and come to the session prepared. Friends within the synagogue community might help surface problems you hadn't thought about, so encourage committee members to ask for suggestions and discuss the exciting opportunities for change that are on the horizon.

Process:

1. **Welcome and Introduction (5 minutes):** Begin by welcoming participants and explaining the purpose of the brainstorming session. Remind them that in a bluesky brainstorming session there are no wrong ideas. No one should be saying why an idea (or problem) isn't valid or won't work.
2. **Problem Identification (15 minutes):**
 - Ask participants to individually write down key challenges or problems they perceive within the synagogue community on sticky notes.
 - Encourage participants to think broadly and consider issues related to membership, programming, facilities, communication, and engagement, among many other things.
3. **Share and Group (10 minutes):**
 - Have participants share their ideas one by one, placing sticky notes on a wall
 - As a group, group similar ideas together to identify common themes or categories of problems.
4. **Voting (5 minutes):**
 - Provide each participant with a set number of stickers or markers to vote for the most pressing problems.
 - Ask participants to place their votes on the problems they believe are most critical.
5. **Problem Prioritization (10 minutes):**
 - Based on the voting results, identify the top 3-5 problems that have received the most votes.
 - Discuss the reasons behind the prioritization and ensure that the group agrees on the selected problems.
6. **Save your Notes:**
 - Before you clean up, take pictures of all of the post-it notes, or type the full list of problems into a document. Even though you will not be addressing all of them right away, you have identified many directions for future Imagineers to be creative problem solvers!

Next Steps:

Write up a brief explanation of the problem or group of problems you would like to solve. You will be asked to share the problem during our first meeting of the Sulam for Imagineers.

