



**LEADING EDGE**

Alliance for Excellence in Jewish Leadership

# CEO SUCCESSION

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Case Study of Excellence from  
the Jewish Nonprofit Sector

**BEND THE ARC**

a jewish partnership

**for justice**

CASE STUDY

# BEND THE ARC



**Alan van Capelle**  
CEO  
Bend the Arc  
2012–2014



**Stosh Cotler**  
CEO  
Bend the Arc: A Jewish  
Partnership for Justice  
2014–Present

*Why not? I mean, really, why not?*

**F**or Stosh Cotler, it was a lightbulb moment. As the long-tenured executive vice president at Bend the Arc, a national progressive Jewish organization, she had been told by the board that it wished to consider her for the role of chief executive officer, a position that had recently opened up after the incumbent CEO announced his departure to another nonprofit. Would Cotler be willing to throw her hat in the ring?

Cotler was a logical pick: A talented insider who had overseen the implementation of a recent merger, she had deep institutional knowledge, a strong relationship with the board, and the respect of the staff. But Cotler wasn't interested in occupying the corner office, nor did she see herself as CEO material. She had doubts: Do I even want to be a chief executive? I've never done a job like this before. I don't have the experience I need. What if I fail?

According to research conducted by Leading Edge, the American Jewish nonprofit workforce is comprised of approximately 70% women and 30% men. The CEOs, however, are 30% women and 70% men. Gender parity and minority representation in leadership roles remain a challenge throughout society—including in corporate offices and boardrooms, as well as government. The reasons for the glass ceiling are numerous, and they include deep societal biases that hold women back. But too often, talented female candidates are passed over for the top job because they themselves decide to opt out as a result of a lifetime of societal messages convincing women that they are not leadership material.

Eventually, Cotler would decide not to join the cohort of overlooked talent; she agreed to put herself forward and was selected as Bend the Arc's new CEO in 2014. By all accounts, her tenure has been a success thus far. Her journey from a hesitant number two to an assured

CEO holds lessons for any organization wishing to ensure it finds the best candidate to fill the corner office.

### **Risk Aversion**

Hundreds of academic studies have shown that women are, in general, more averse to risk than men—which is a main reason why they may be reluctant to put themselves forward for demanding CEO roles. In one study, Sarah Fulton, an associate professor of political science at Texas A&M, asked state-level legislators how high the odds of winning would have to be for them to consider running for Congress. She found that for women, the odds had to be at least 20%. Men, on the other hand, were willing to jump into a race if the chance of winning were larger than zero.

Cotler dreaded the idea of failing as CEO. But her fear wasn't focused around damage to her reputation. She felt protective of the organization. "I had given years and years of my life to [Bend the Arc] and that put a lot of pressure on me. I actually felt way more concerned about the organization's well-being and I didn't want to lead it to failure," Cotler explains.

What's more, Cotler was good at her existing job—and she enjoyed it. Preceded by two charismatic male leaders, Cotler assumed that the CEO role at Bend the Arc was fixed rather than malleable. "There were aspects of the job that were not attractive—that

just didn't really interest me," Cotler explains. "I didn't realize that while these would always be a part of the job, it didn't have to be the main part of the job." Amy Wrzesniewski, a professor at the Yale School of Management, has written about this concept of job crafting, a process of shaping work experiences such that work can become more meaningful and enjoyable.

Over time, Cotler also came to realize that the priorities that the next CEO faced at Bend the Arc aligned well with her existing strengths. Having changed CEOs twice in a span of three years, the board "wanted the continuity of someone who knew the organization backwards and forward," explains Steve Rohde, who chaired the board at the time of Cotler's appointment. "We knew she had great respect and love from the staff and that was very important to us."

Rabbi Felicia Sol, who served on the board at the time of Cotler's selection, agrees that the leadership needs had changed for the organization. It had been three years since Bend the Arc had formed through the merger of the New York-based Jewish Funds for Justice and the West Coast-based Progressive Jewish Alliance. "Initially, our CEOs were dashing around doing fundraising or focusing on acquisitions and someone internally had to do the work—that ended up being [Cotler]. She had the deep relationship with staff, and the board felt that was important given all the recent upheaval."

But Cotler still had doubts about her ability to be a CEO. Research suggests that over-ambitious job descriptions depress interest among female candidates. The hero status often bestowed on CEOs can give the impression that the job is immense and requires superhuman talent. That image tends not to deter men, who often feel confident in their ability to fill gaps in

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their skills and experience. Women, on the other hand, can be discouraged if they don't have all the qualities or experience seemingly required of a CEO. Cotler admits that she had this reaction when considering the CEO role at Bend the Arc. "Women go through a job description and if we don't feel like we can do everything that is listed, we

don't apply. I know this is a danger, but I still did the same thing at first; I couldn't help it."

Cotler says that a breakthrough came when she spoke with a male CEO who was moving to a larger organization that required experience handling real estate finances, an area of expertise that he didn't have. Cotler asked him about whether that worried him. He replied, "I'll learn."

"I realized I didn't think this way. But there's no reason that I shouldn't have the same optimistic view of my ability to learn and grow," she says.

### **It Takes a Village**

In 2004, Cotler had been in one of the first cohorts of a Jewish leadership training program (which evolved into the Selah Leadership Program, now administered by Bend the Arc). Along with the knowledge imparted through instruction, such leadership training programs promote gender equality long after they are over through the power of their alumni networks—as female graduates rise within professional ranks, they bring other graduates up with them by acting as supporters and advocates. As she considered the CEO position, Cotler called on a variety of people in her professional network for advice; she particularly remembers an important dinner with a colleague at Bend the Arc who had been in her Selah cohort. "I told him I was thinking about putting my name forward for

the CEO position. I asked him ‘Can I do this job?’ When he said yes, it gave me a tremendous amount of confidence because I trusted that he would answer honestly and not let me get in above my head,” Cotler recalls.

Cotler used others from the Selah network as sounding boards as well—including Sol, who had gone on to become a Bend the Arc board member (though she didn’t serve on the executive committee and wasn’t directly involved in the CEO transition). Sol remembers a long drive she took with Cotler in which the pair discussed the CEO opportunity. “We spoke about the recognition that you don’t have to have everything to become CEO. Just because you don’t have the experience or the training doesn’t mean you can’t get it. And we spoke about how her fixation on her weaknesses was something that women tend to internalize and that it holds women back,” Sol recalls.

As she struggled to get her head around whether to put herself forward,

Cotler remembers a helpful piece of advice from a close friend who is an academic dean. “She told me to go into work every day for a week and imagine that I’m the CEO. Hold that role in your psyche and see how it feels. Be curious about it,” Cotler recalls. The role-playing helped build Cotler’s confidence that a transition to the corner office wouldn’t be as extreme as she feared. She also met with several vital staff members at Bend the Arc and asked if they would stay on if she were to become CEO; they all said yes.

Finally, the board was proactive in nurturing Cotler’s ambitions. Rohde, the board chair, had multiple conversations with Cotler in which he encouraged her to apply. He addressed her concerns straight on. He explained that she did indeed have gaps in experience—particularly in fundraising and public relations. Rohde told her that the board would provide funds for an executive coach and support her as she filled in these gaps. “She was very amenable,” Rohde recalls. “She was



**We spoke about how her fixation on her weaknesses was something that women tend to internalize and that it holds women back.**

**RABBI FELICIA SOL**

tenacious in doing training, reading, studying, examining other leaders.” Alan van Capelle, the outgoing CEO, also encouraged Cotler to apply.

### **A Nontraditional Candidate**

Cotler was the board’s leading candidate—but when she decided to put herself forward for the role, the board still did its due diligence through an extensive interview process (it put a wider search on hold while assessing Cotler). Cotler recalls that, paradoxically, its probing reassured her. “They didn’t hold back, they didn’t coddle me, they didn’t make it a rubber-stamp interview, which I deeply appreciate,” she recalls. “I came really prepared and I wanted to make sure for my own sense of confidence that I wasn’t being hired because it was the easy thing to do but because the board believed that I was the best choice.”

During and after the interview, the board also offered feedback to Cotler, which again reinforced her confidence. “They gave really effective feedback because it was specific. They didn’t just say ‘your answer was excellent;’ they would say ‘it was when you spontaneously made that comment that helped us understand your perspective—that was really excellent,’” she recalls.

In January 2014, Bend the Arc announced Cotler’s selection as its next CEO—making her one of the first female CEOs of a large national Jewish

organization. But Rohde says gender wasn’t a consideration at all during board discussions. “What mattered to us as a board was that we could elevate and promote a superb candidate from within the organization, just straight out,” he says.

Nonetheless, Cotler’s background drew attention from the Jewish press. The Forward published an article titled “Bend the Arc Leader Stosh Cotler has Radical Streak—and Black Belt,” which recounted, among other colorful details, that Cotler was a sex worker in her 20s and had only discovered Judaism when a lesbian couple whom she had performed for at a strip club invited her to their Passover Seder. Cotler had always been open about her unconventional profile—and has defended it as one of her strengths. “It’s part of my life, part of my story, I’m not ashamed about it, and the board knew it’s not something I would ever hide,” she says. “If we want to have people in leadership roles that are different than the ones we have now, it means we need to open ourselves to the possibility that people’s lives have been different as well, and that’s a good thing.”

Rohde says the Bend the Arc board was aware of Cotler’s unconventional background and felt confident in its choice because the board’s own diversity of constituents made it a good proxy for the progressive Jewish community writ large. “The board at the time was composed of people

with a range of experience, age, and geographic diversity—we felt we were highly representative of the progressive Jewish community,” he says. “Our test was, can she be an effective leader? Through that lens, her personality, her unorthodox background, her experiences in life and within the organization all became a plus.”

Over the long term, the board’s belief in Cotler (and her belief in herself) has been validated by her successful tenure at Bend the Arc. Shortly after her appointment, Cotler received a high-profile external accolade as well: She was included in the “Forward 50” list of Jews who have had a profound impact on the American Jewish community over the past year. “Tell someone to picture the CEO of a Jewish not-for-profit organization and they probably won’t envision a woman with a tattoo, a black belt in kung fu, a history of demonstrating against Israeli policies, and experience dancing at a sex club. But Stosh Cotler has all that and more,” the Forward wrote in its nomination. The write-up also included an endorsement from Ruth Messinger, then president of American Jewish World Service (AJWS), who applauded Cotler’s “responsive, out-of-the-box thinking.”

### **The Importance of Insiders**

The bias against women during CEO searches is powerful and deep-seated. For example, research shows that when you ask people to draw a leader, they sketch a picture of a man. Dispelling

gender bias during an external search—when interactions with candidates are relatively brief—can be extremely difficult. For this reason, many proponents of gender equality believe that the promotion of talented insiders can help ensure women aren’t passed over for more traditionally charismatic male candidates.

For his part, Rohde supports this view. “Our search at Bend the Arc inspired me in other situations to think about the value of a promotion from within the organization,” he says. “The pool of internal senior leaders just below the CEO is filled with competent women. By looking internally, you probably will be identifying female candidates who have hit a glass ceiling, who have not been nurtured, who have not themselves even envisioned being a top dog. It’s a resource that needs to be tapped.”

Five years into her tenure, Cotler is now a confident, successful CEO, but she’s still bucking trends—she recently took a three-month sabbatical during which she deputized two women who, with Cotler, form a three-person executive team that runs the organization. (Sabbaticals, while supported by research as a means of spurring strategic thinking and keeping executives engaged, are still not widely adopted.) Since becoming CEO, Cotler has grown the number of chapters in U.S. cities from three to 16, the staff from 22 to 50, and the budget from \$3.5 to \$7.5 million, all supported by a

major increase in the number of donors to the organization. Her experience as a reluctant insider turned powerhouse CEO continues to shape her leadership, however. In recent years, she's invested more in staff training and development, which she sees as closely linked with Bend the Arc's internal diversity efforts.

"Our goal is to help our staff with capacity-building and skill-building, and we've connected our training programs with the goal of building our staff's confidence," Cotler says, before pausing. "I know firsthand how important that can be."

## EPILOGUE

Lay leaders have a responsibility to work with the executive staff to identify high-potential employees. This often means reaching deep into an organization to form direct relationships with executives below the C-suite. **At Bend the Arc, the board's stroke of genius was identifying a possible CEO—even before she saw the leadership potential in herself.** Then it gave her the time and resources to build her experience and confidence. To ensure that the best candidates are emerging into leadership positions in the Jewish community—regardless of their gender or background—boards should do everything they can to make sure they are not overlooking talented insider candidates.

## APPENDIX: STOSH COTLER'S FORWARD 50 PROFILE

**Forward50****Stosh Cotler**

Tell someone to picture the CEO of a Jewish not-for-profit organization and they probably won't envision a woman with a tattoo, a black belt in kung fu, a history of demonstrating against Israeli policies and experience dancing at a sex club. But Stosh Cotler has all that and more.

Cotler, 46, took over as CEO of the progressive organization Bend the Arc in February. That in itself is a rarity: Few Jewish communal organizations not specifically devoted to women's issues are headed by women. Cotler, who identifies as queer, is also an unusual choice in that she didn't get involved with Judaism until her late 20s. She recounted in the *Forward* how it was only when a lesbian couple invited her to their Passover Seder that she discovered "that being Jewish could be revolutionary."

Cotler sees her unconventional background as an asset that can help attract Jews "who have little or no or an ambivalent connection to being Jewish." Other female CEOs in her orbit agree: Ruth Messinger, president of American Jewish World Service, has applauded Cotler's "responsive, out-of-the-box thinking."

Bend the Arc, which advocates for liberal causes like workers' rights and immigration reform, has been Cotler's professional home since 2005; she served as executive vice president for the past three years. But her experience fighting liberal battles stretches back to her time as an activist in Portland, Oregon, where she designed programs to train women in self-defense and empower local girls. In many ways, Cotler was a natural choice to helm this organization.

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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.

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