JoshuaVentureGroup

Picking a Needle out of a Haystack:
Selecting for social entrepreneurs

Founded in 1999, Joshua Venture Group (JVGroup) invests in social entrepreneurs working to expand and reinvigorate the Jewish community. In the spring of 2010, JVGroup received 131 applications for our then soon-to-be re-launched Dual Investment Program. Although only eight fellows were eventually chosen to participate in the program, an analysis of the applicant pool revealed who were developing social entrepreneurial ideas, where they were located, and what topics their ideas covered. Joshua Venture Group shared this information in the aggregate to provide a larger understanding of the field.

This second paper describes the process we used to select our current cohort of fellows. More specifically, it explains how we assessed who we thought would be successful both as social entrepreneurs as well as positive members of a cohort. By sharing our process, we intend to exemplify how transparency and knowledge-sharing can lift all boats, and how they play a role in advancing the philanthropic and social innovation sectors. As a recently re-launched learning organization, we look forward to sharing more of our "lessons from Joshua Venture Group" as our cohort of fellows and program continue to mature.

Framing the Issue:
How to assess the potential of a social entrepreneur?

What is the definition of a social entrepreneur?

As JVGroup re-launched our fellowship for young Jewish social entrepreneurs, we relied on our proven process assessing three major areas:

- The originality and potential impact of the idea;
- The soundness of the business model and venture structure; and
- The leadership potential of the social entrepreneur.

How do you find and identify them?

In order to thoroughly understand the type of person and change we were seeking, we built off Echoing Green's powerful definition[1] of social entrepreneurship and integrated our own mission and Jewish values to create a working definition of a social entrepreneur in the Jewish community:

Just as an entrepreneur in the business world does, the Jewish social entrepreneur identifies a void or significant opportunity in society and acts to address it with the aim of effecting positive social change. The entrepreneur develops a creative solution and a sound business plan to shift the status quo by implementing a venture that is sustainable and significantly impacts the current landscape.

Even with a conceptual understanding of what we were looking for, we were left with a crucial question: how could we *effectively assess* that someone who was at an early stage of a project had the potential to be a successful social entrepreneur?

Focusing on Competencies:
How to find the methodology to ask the right questions?

One of our key funders, The Lippman Kanfer Family Foundation, had introduced us to Lominger's Leadership Architect during the search for JVGroup's executive director.[2] Having been pleased with the process and outcome, we decided to employ this methodology and the professional who led that process to provide input into our fellow selection.

This methodology would allow us to identify the most important **competencies – the "measurable characteristics of a person that include behaviors, skill and attitudes that are related to performing successfully at work"**[3] – that a social entrepreneur should exhibit.

In this way, we approached the position of the social entrepreneur, founder and leader of a social change organization - in the rigorous fashion often used in employee hiring - by developing a profile of the position based upon competencies. According to this methodology, the best way to determine the competencies required and to create a profile for a specific role is to ask those who have demonstrated success in the field – called SMEs, Subject Matter Experts.

We invited SMEs (alumni and other successful social entrepreneurs) as well as staff, board and advisory council members (see Appendix I for those who participated) to rank 26 competencies and to choose the most critical. For more details on this process, see Appendix II. We analyzed the results, and the consensus that emerged suggested that the following seven competencies are the most **mission critical**:

Action Oriented
Enjoys working hard; is action oriented and full of energy for the things he/she sees as challenging; not fearful of acting with a minimum of planning; seizes more opportunities than others.

Dealing With Ambiguity
Can effectively cope with change; can shift gears comfortably; can decide and act without having the total picture; isn't upset when thing are up in the air; doesn't have to finish things before moving on; can comfortably handle risk and uncertainty.

Interpersonal Savvy
Relates well to all kinds of people, up, down, and sideways, inside and outside the organization; builds appropriate rapport; builds constructive and effective relationships; uses diplomacy and tact; can diffuse even high-tension situations comfortably.

Learning on the Fly
Learns quickly when facing new problems; a relentless and versatile learner; open to change; analyzes both successes and failures for clues to improvement; experiments and will try anything to find solutions; enjoys the challenge of unfamiliar tasks; quickly grasps the essence and the underlying structure of anything.

Managing Vision & Purpose
Communicates a compelling and inspired vision or sense of core purpose; talks beyond today; talks about possibilities; is optimistic; creates mileposts and symbols to rally support behind the vision; makes the vision sharable by everyone; can inspire and motivate entire units or organizations.

Perseverance
Pursues everything with energy, drive, and a need to finish; seldom gives up before finishing, especially in the face of resistance or setbacks.

Self- Knowledge
Knows personal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and limits; seeks feedback; gains insights from mistakes; is open to criticism; isn't defensive; is receptive to talking about shortcomings; looks forward to balanced (+'s and -'s) performance reviews and career discussions.

These competencies all contribute to a successful social entrepreneur, and although some were more whole-heartedly agreed upon (see Appendix IV), there is no particular order. Successful social entrepreneurs may not be equally strong in all of these competencies, but they will have some mixture of them.

Analyzing the results:
What does this tell us and what are the implications?

After conducting this rather complex process that involved collecting input from more than two dozen individuals in person and over email, it was time to step back and consider what these results meant for us and what we were going to do with them.

Juxtaposing and combining different perspectives. One of the most interesting findings we saw was that the SMEs ranked certain competencies differently than the staff, board and advisory council members. For example, many of the non-SMEs highlighted competencies such as **Building Effective Teams** and **Organizing**, which did not rank as high for the alumni and other entrepreneurs. SMEs ranked **Creativity** and **Perseverance** higher than non-SMEs, and although both groups ranked **Interpersonal Savvy** as critical, non-SMEs scored it higher overall.

These examples underscore our reasoning for incorporating this process: it is not always evident what evaluators should be looking at – even a board and staff who are knowledgeable about the field prioritized some competencies differently. By integrating both perspectives, we combined internal and external views, both of which have their own truths and biases.

Prioritizing the competencies. According to the methodology, not all competencies are equal when looking at *how* to select. Some competencies are harder to learn and acquire. Some competencies can be learned over time, such as **Building Effective Teams**, and some are harder to learn, such as **Learning on the Fly**. For this reason, we chose to focus in the interview process on one of the hardest to acquire – **Self-Knowledge**.

Recognizing the possibility of overuse. In some situations, individuals will play up one strength in order to compensate for a weaker area. This can often be an asset, but when overused, it becomes a detriment. When assessing someone's ability for each competency, the ratings include: low, meets the needs, exceeds, untested, or overused. Overused is one of the more interesting ratings, as when one is so agile at **Interpersonal Savvy** or **Action Oriented** it becomes overly replied upon, and perhaps used to compensate for other weaknesses.

We checked for overuse of **Interpersonal Savvy**, by ensuring that applicants didn't rely so heavily on the "schmooze" that there was little substance to back it up. We also ensured that candidates were not so overly focused on their **Drive for Results** that they ignored others' input or did not slow down to build buy-in or a cohesive team.

Tailoring the process:
How to integrate this new knowledge into the selection?

Step 1: The Written Application

Once we knew what we were looking for, we used Lominger's Interview Architect to design application and interview questions, as well as a specific interview process, to find the candidates who we believed would be most successful. Our two-step written application process asked candidates to detail specific experiences that highlighted the most important competencies through the following questions:

Q1. Describe a time when you had to get something done and you did not have enough information or resources to do it.	
WHY WE included it	This addresses the questions of drive, orientation towards action, and ability to work within ambiguity. These reflect a candidate's "results agility".
HOW IT guided us	When evaluating, we looked for evidence of self-confidence, perseverance, motivation and inspiration, driving for results, and setting high standards.

> **Q2.** *Describe a time when you were required to do something that you did not want to do, but it was important to do so.*

WHY WE included it	This question allowed us to assess mental agility, primarily the **Self-Knowledge** competency.
HOW IT guided us	Reviewers looked for evidence that the applicant admits mistakes, seeks feedback, understands strengths and weaknesses, is self-reflective, and observes and adjusts.

The questions on the written application proved useful for the interviews as they provided specific experiences for interviewers to further explore. We prioritized asking questions about **Self-Knowledge**, which our earlier process had identified as an essential competency for social entrepreneurs. **Self-Knowledge** enables one to recognize personal weaknesses and to enlist others with these strengths to execute in the areas where they don't have the skills or competencies.

Step 2: The Interview Process

We invited 18 finalists to travel to NYC for interviews with our 9-member selection panel. Interviews are best for helping to evaluate competencies such as **Perseverance** and **Interpersonal Savvy**, which may be more easily detected in an interpersonal exchange.

The interview process was divided over two days. Our selection committee included board and advisory council members, alumni, the Lominger Associate, and the executive director. Applicants interviewed with three sub-groups, each lasting for 30 minutes. Each sub-group focused on one of three themes – leadership competencies, the venture structure, and the idea. This approach allowed interviewers to spend a total of 90 minutes with each finalist, and to explore key issues more intensely in the smaller group setting. Sub-groups held pre-meetings to determine key questions that they would pose to each finalist around their theme, based both on their own assessment of the applicant and on the comments and questions posed by the outside evaluators who had read the written application.

We brought in the Lominger Associate, who had been interviewing for competencies for decades, to anchor the sub-group on leadership. Some found his questions to be blunt, as he often further probed candidates to produce more revealing answers. He asked one candidate to come up with another example of the written question, Q2, listed above. The Associate suggested the example could be personal or professional, which prompted the candidate to share the story of agreeing to go to couples therapy with a romantic partner who was threatening to walk otherwise. Although this may have been somewhat unusual for the setting, he effectively helped us to understand whether each finalist was aware of personal weaknesses, could reflect on personal experiences, and could demonstrate the ability to change his/her behavior moving forward.

Step 3: The Selection

After the interviews, the JVGroup selection panel gathered together to choose the eight fellows from the 18 finalists. Factors assessed were:

- The candidate's leadership strengths;
- The originality and impact of the idea;
- The soundness of the business model; and
- The candidate's contribution to a balanced and well-functioning cohort.

Often, input from the leadership sub-group reflected what other panelists intuitively assessed about the viability of a candidate. However, including this structured, added perspective gave us more confidence in our intuition.

These insights have since proven valuable in the creation of the fellows' individualized educational plans and development programs.

Conclusion: Looking Back, Looking Forward

Interviews and application processes are often driven by intuition and subjectivity. While these perspectives certainly have a role, adding an analytical framework to a selection process can enhance decision-making and improve the likelihood of a strong ultimate fit. Integrating the competency model into our selection process did, in fact, give us added confidence to our choices, and we are proud of our process, as well as our chosen fellows.

We will build upon our learnings from this past year as we prepare for our next selection process in 2011. We will use these competencies to ask better questions on our application, to refine how we evaluate our candidates, and to then communicate this to our more than 70 outside evaluators so they can understand what we are searching for.

We see the process of identifying these competencies as another piece of our continuous learning cycle, and look forward to improving upon our processes with each cohort.

Notes:

1 *We believe that social entrepreneurs are those exceptional individuals who dream up and take responsibility for an innovative and untested idea for positive social change, and usher that idea from dream to reality. What enables social entrepreneurs to make lasting impact on the most difficult problems is a special combination of groundbreaking creativity and steadfast execution.* (Echoing Green)

2 *A Guide for Coaching and Development.5th edition*, Korn Ferry International 2009, page i, Introduction

3 Lippman Kanfer Family Foundation shares enlightening resources with entrepreneurial Jewish organizations, such as JVGroup, to strengthen our processes and help to realize our mission.

Appendix I: JVGroup Subject Matter Experts & Other Participants, Fall 2009

Participant	Organization	JVGroup Affiliation
Ronit Avni*	Just Vision	Alumna
Aaron Bisman*	JDub	Alumnus, Advisory Council
Alan Cohen	Henry Schein, LLC	Board Chair
Lisa Hersch	McKinsey	Board Member
Elie Kaunfer*	Mechon Hadar	
Jenny Kibrit	Joshua Venture Group	Staff
Idit Klein*	Keshet	Alumna
Aliza Kline*	Mayyim Hayyim	
Lisa Lepson	Joshua Venture Group	Staff
Jane Leu*	Upwardly Global	Advisory Council
Aliza Mazor	Bikkurim	Advisory Council
Marcella Kanfer Rolnick	Lippmann Kanfer Family Fdn	Advisory Council
David Rosenn*	Avodah	
Julie Shaffer	Oreg Foundation	Board Member
Mamie Kanfer Stewart	Lippmann Kanfer Family Fdn	

Denotes Subject Matter Expert

Appendix II: JVGroup Process to Choose Competencies

Step 1: Inviting the Participants.
JVGroup staff invited alumni and other successful social entrepreneurs (from both the secular and Jewish communities) to convene as a focus group of SMEs (see Appendix I for participants), and asked those who couldn't attend to participate over email. We also invited our board and staff to participate.

Step 2: Narrowing the Competencies.
To begin with, JVGroup staff, under advisement from the Lominger Associate, reviewed the 86 most common competencies required for professional positions, and chose 26 which we felt should be under consideration to be essential for social entrepreneurs (see Appendix III for list of all 26 competencies). We benchmarked this profile against comparable job profiles to ensure that these 26 were appropriate. We gathered the SMEs to consider which of these were *mission critical* for a successful social entrepreneur.

Step 3: Ranking the Competencies.
Staff gathered those who could attend the focus group, where we discussed the competencies together. Each attendee was given a set cards containing all of the competencies and their respective definitions. They were then asked to separate the cards with the competencies into 3 piles: *mission critical*, *moderately important*, and *least important*. Rankings were restricted to selecting only 8 *mission critical*, 9 *moderately important*, and 9 *least important*. Those who could not attend were asked to do this same process over email and fill out a spreadsheet.

This exercise was not easy: a social entrepreneur is a salesperson, a visionary, a manager, and a team-builder – requiring many competencies. For example, one SME was quite perturbed to put **Listening** in the *least important* category, but understood that although she felt it was very important, other competencies were even *more* essential.

Additionally, some competencies are more difficult to learn or acquire. For example, while **Organizing** is important, it can be learned, or can be compensated for with a strong COO or Administrator. **Perseverance**, however, is less likely to be learned or compensated for.

Step 4: Consolidating the data.
After each SME, board, staff, and advisory council member ranked the 26 competencies, JVGroup staff assigned each competency a numerical ranking (3 for *mission critical*, 2 for *moderately important*, and 3 for *least important*) and created a spreadsheet to analyze the results. After consulting with the Lominger Associate, we settled on the chosen competencies and developed a more detailed profile.

Appendix IV: 26 Competencies, Average Score and Sorted

MISSION CRITICAL

Competency	Average Score
Managing Vision and Purpose	2.63
Dealing With Ambiguity	2.50
Action Oriented	2.44
Perseverance	2.44
Interpersonal Savvy	2.31
Learning on the Fly	2.31
Integrity & Trust	2.25
Self-Knowledge	2.19

MODERATELY IMPORTANT

Competency	Average Score
Motivating Others	2.13
Creativity	2.06
Priority Setting	2.00
Organizing	1.94
Strategic Agility	1.94
Intellectual Horsepower	1.88
Drive for Results	1.88
Standing Alone	1.88
Command Skills	1.81
Timely Decision Making	1.81
Managing & Measuring Work	1.81
Building Effective Teams	1.81
Customer Focus	1.75

LEAST IMPORTANT

Competency	Average Score
Listening	1.63
Innovation Management	1.50
Negotiating	1.50
Planning	1.44
Time Management	1.44

Participants ranked competencies on a three-point scale:
3=mission critical; 2=moderately important; 1=least important

Rankings were limited to the following restrictions:
9 mission critical, 9 moderately important, and 8 least important

Appendix III: 26 Competencies Identified by JVGroup

Competency	Definition
Action Oriented	*Enjoys working hard; is action oriented and full of energy for the things he/she sees as challenging; not fearful of acting with a minimum of planning; seizes more opportunities than others.*
Dealing with Ambiguity	*Can effectively cope with change; can shift gears comfortably; can decide and act without having the total picture; isn't upset when things are up in the air; doesn't have to finish things before moving on; can comfortably handle risk and uncertainty.*
Command Skills	*Relishes leading; takes unpopular stands if necessary; encourages direct and tough debate but isn't afraid to end it an move on; is looked to for direction in a crisis; faces adversity head on; energized by tough challenges.*
Creativity	*Comes up with a lot of new and unique ideas; easily makes connections among previously unrelated notions; tends to be seen as original and value-added in brainstorming settings.*
Customer Focus	*Is dedicated to meeting the expectations and requirements of internal and external customers; gets first-hand customer information and uses it for improvements in products and services; acts with customers in mind; establishes and maintains effective relationships with customers and gains their trust and respect.*
Timely Decision Making	*Makes decisions in a timely manner, sometimes with incomplete information and under tight deadlines and pressure; able to make a quick decision.*
Innovation Management	*Is good at bringing the creative ideas of others to market; has good judgment about which creative ideas and suggestions will work; has a sense about managing the creative process of others; can facilitate effective brainstorming; can project how potential ideas may play out in the marketplace.*

Competency	Definition
Integrity & Trust	*Is widely trusted; is seen as a direct, truthful individual; can present the unvarnished truth in an appropriate and helpful manner; keeps confidences; admits mistakes; doesn't misrepresent him/herself for personal gain.*
Intellectual Horsepower	*Is bright and intelligent; deals with concepts and complexity comfortably; described as intellectually sharp, capable, and agile.*
Interpersonal Savvy	*Relates well to all kinds of people, up, down, and sideways, inside and outside the organization; builds appropriate rapport; builds constructive and effective relationships; uses diplomacy and tact; can diffuse even high-tension situations comfortably.*
Learning on the Fly	*Learns quickly when facing new problems; a relentless and versatile learner; open to change; analyzes both successes and failures for clues to improvement; experiments and will try anything to find solutions; enjoys the challenge of unfamiliar tasks; quickly grasps the essence and the underlying structure of anything.*
Listening	*Practices attentive and active listening; has the patience to hear people out; can accurately restate the opinions of others even when he/she disagrees.*
Managing and Measuring Work	*Clearly assigns responsibility for tasks and decisions; sets clear objectives and measures; monitors process, progress, and results; designs feedback loops into work.*
Motivating Others	*Creates a climate in which people want to do their best; can motivate many kinds of direct reports and team or project members; can assess each person's hot button and use it to get the best out of him/her; pushes tasks and decisions down; empowers others; invites input from each person and shares ownership and visibility; makes each individual feel his/her work is important; is someone people like working for and with.*

Appendix III: 26 Competencies Identified by JVGroup Staff (cont'd)

Competency	Definition
Negotiating	*Can negotiate skillfully in tough situations with both internal and external groups; can settle differences with minimum noise; can win concessions without damaging relationships; can be both direct and forceful as well as diplomatic; gains trust quickly of other parties to the negotiations; has a good sense of timing.*
Organizing	*Can marshal resources (people, funding, material, support) to get things done; can orchestrate multiple activities at once to accomplish a goal; uses resources effectively and efficiently; arranges information and files in a useful manner.*
Perseverance	*Pursues everything with energy, drive, and a need to finish; seldom gives up before finishing, especially in the face of resistance or setbacks.*
Planning	*Accurately scopes out length and difficulty of tasks and projects; sets objectives and goals; breaks down work into the process steps; develops schedules and task/people assignments; anticipates and adjusts for problems and roadblocks; measures performance against goals; evaluates results.*
Priority Setting	*Spends his/her time and the time of others on what's important; quickly zeros in on the critical few and puts the trivial many aside; can quickly sense what will help or hinder accomplishing a goal; eliminates roadblocks; creates focus.*
Drive for Results	*Can be counted on to exceed goals successfully; is constantly and consistently one of the top performers; very bottom-line oriented; steadfastly pushes self and others for results.*
Self-Knowledge	*Knows personal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and limits; seeks feedback; gains insights from mistakes; is open to criticism; isn't defensive; is receptive to talking about shortcomings; looks forward to balanced (+'s and -'s) performance reviews and career discussions.*

Competency	Definition
Standing Alone	*Will stand up and be counted; doesn't shirk personal responsibility; can be counted on when times are tough; willing to be the only champion for an idea or position; is comfortable working alone on a tough assignment.*
Strategic Agility	*Sees ahead clearly; can anticipate future consequences and trend accurately; has broad knowledge and perspective; is future oriented; can articulately paint credible pictures and visions of possibilities and likelihoods; can create competitive and breakthrough strategies and plans.*
Building Effective Teams	*Blends people into teams when needed; creates strong morale and spirit in his/her team; shares wins and successes; fosters open dialogue; lets people finish and be responsible for their work; defines success in terms of whole team; creates a feeling of belonging in the team.*
Time Management	*Uses his/her time effectively and efficiently; values time; concentrates his/her efforts on the more important priorities; gets more done in less time than others; can attend to a broader range of activities.*
Managing Vision & Purpose	*Communicates a compelling and inspired vision or sense of core purpose; talks beyond today; talks about possibilities; is optimistic; creates mileposts and symbols to rally support behind the vision; makes the vision sharable by everyone; can inspire and motivate entire units or organizations.*

About this Report

About Joshua Venture Group

OUR MISSION is	Joshua Venture Group seeks to reinvigorate and expand the Jewish community by cultivating the leadership and management capability of talented, passionate young Jewish social entrepreneurs and by investing in their visions and in the growth of healthy, sustainable organizations. For more information, visit us at: www.JoshuaVentureGroup.org