The absence of a systematic approach to congregant development has far-reaching consequences. Enormous energy and frustration are tied up in getting people to volunteer. Programs start, stop, and restart as volunteers ebb and flow. Active leaders burn out as they assume more and more of the responsibility that they are unable to delegate to others. And professional staff find themselves in the position of serving customers rather than marshalling the forces of the members themselves.

Congregants are not adequately asked. Generalized appeals are easy (“Everyone come help build our sukkah!”). The individualized, one-on-one approach is more difficult, but it is also significantly more effective. For example, one president told us, “which just becomes papers in someone’s desk.”

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The failure of congregant development has nothing to do with the ability of the members. Indeed, these congregations are populated with “unbelievably capable, talented” people. And although many congregations do not take the first step of collecting information on member interests and skills, that is not the fundamental problem either. Even where an effort has been made to send out a card asking people to indicate their interests, congregant development is lacking. “We tend to collect a lot of information,” one leader told us, “which just becomes papers in someone’s desk.”

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“We told ourselves we had no expectations...”

Since T&V’s Friday night services have always attracted a younger crowd, we decided to have something for them every Synaplex Friday night. We’ve hosted a wine tasting, an Indian dinner with entertainment by three comedians, and a chocolate social. Some events planned for the whole community have included an extra component for young adults. For example, Ruth Messenger, president of American Jewish World Service, talked about the Darfur genocide in December. We priced the dinner lower for students and young adults and invited them to stay and socialize after the speaker. It was thrilling to hear one young man say it was his first time in a synagogue since he was 8 years old.

One thing we’ve tried to do is involve new people in planning and running Synaplex events. Our action team includes two high-school kids and others who have not previously volunteered. Among our new programs are Moving Into Shabbat yoga and a lay-led discussion of the week’s parsha. Out of not-always-welcome necessity, we are developing new processes, from how we interact with the office staff, to who makes decisions and how, to identifying capable (and, alas, incapable) volunteers.

Another new element has been working with two of our neighbors, East End Temple and Brotherhood Synagogue. In the beginning, I think we all felt it was more than enough to get our own programs going, and doing things together felt a bit like a forced marriage. We couldn’t seem to shake our worries about “poaching” or Reform versus Conservative requirements. However, in the last month or so, we have begun to figure out how this partnership can work. Rather than joint programming, we are trying joint marketing. To that end, we placed a three-way ad for Shabbat Across America. There have also been some teen programs for kids from the three shuls.

We’ve had a gratifying response from longtime members, from two-day-a-year attendees who’ve shown up for every book chat to regular shulgoers who have said they were more excited about shul on Synaplex Shabbat than they’d been in years. Synaplex has given T&V the opportunity, as someone said, “to succeed and grow, as well as to fail and learn.”

Elinor Nauen is co-chair of Synaplex at Town & Village Synagogue in Manhattan.

Synchronizing Synaplex at T&V

Elinor Nauen

When Rabbi Sebert introduced Synaplex to the board of Town & Village, I was the most scornful detractor. What’s broken that we’re trying to fix? I demanded.

Not surprisingly, my doubts meant I was volunteered to look further into this project. I spoke with eight or 10 people from the first cohort whose synagogues were 18 months into their grants. Without exception, they said, “It’s a lot of work, but it’s worth it.”

Now, six months into our first year, I say the same: It’s a huge amount of work, but I’m so glad we did it.

Our first Synaplex Shabbat was last September 23 and 24. As a shul, we were unused to planning ahead, coordinating committees, marketing, or much else of what we’ve since learned to do. In addition, the rabbi and one chair were recovering from serious illnesses, while the other chair had her adult bat mitzvah that same Shabbat.

In other words, we were horribly unprepared and overwhelmed. We told ourselves we had no expectations, that we would just see what happened without worrying about attendance or quality.

The punch line, of course, is the place was packed and everything was sensational. Offering free food and wine didn’t hurt. Luckily, we have two secret weapons: a terrific (paid) assistant and three members in their 20s who are in charge of outreach to young adults. They have largely used university listservs to contact the huge population of unaffiliated Jews in our neighborhood, Manhattan’s East Village. The goal, according to Eva Stern, was to “bring them an event that would be fun, appealing, and non-threatening in terms of assuming that they knew a lot about Judaism.”

Another new day is not about simply writing checks from synagogue leaders to UJA-Federation or from UJA-Federation to synagogues; rather it’s about pooling resources to create the experience and opportunities that define Jewish life. This new day is about developing and engaging with all levels of synagogue life. And, with your help, we will develop engaging new initiatives and build on existing ones.

We invite and are interested in your views. Do let us hear from you.

John Ruskay is executive vice president and CEO of UJA-Federation of New York.