IfNotNow members link arms outside Birthright headquarters, demanding that Birthright #ConfrontTheCrisis of the Occupation. (IfNotNow)

Analysis

How to build a culture of support so leaders and movements can thrive

Self-sacrifice and isolation are draining movements of powerful and passionate leaders. Personal support teams can help.

Liz Aeschlimann, Helen Bennett, and Andrew Gordon-Kirsch April 15, 2022

Too often, leadership means facing daunting internal and external expectations on one's own. We're expected to solve problems with limited time and resources. Even when we pull it off, we're often exhausted, too self-critical to savor our achievement and distracted by the next looming deadline. We may have supervisors and colleagues at work, and friends in our personal lives, but rarely do we have people who both understand our work context and are focused solely on our well-being and growth.

This combination of self-sacrifice and isolation leads to burnout, draining our movements and organizations of talented, passionate leaders. But at a deeper level, it keeps us from embodying the unconditional and reciprocal care we dream of in the liberated world we're fighting for.

In 2017, we in IfNotNow — a movement of American Jews fighting to end U.S. support for the occupation in Palestine — noticed that leaders and staff were feeling this stress acutely. Yearning to figure out a structure of support for staff, we spent some time investigating what are sometimes referred to as "personal boards of directors" for nonprofit executives, "support teams" in a peer counseling and anti-oppression community of practice, or "anchor committees" in Quaker communities.

> **Imagine for a moment how it would would feel to have more dedicated support. What might be possible with a team at your back?**

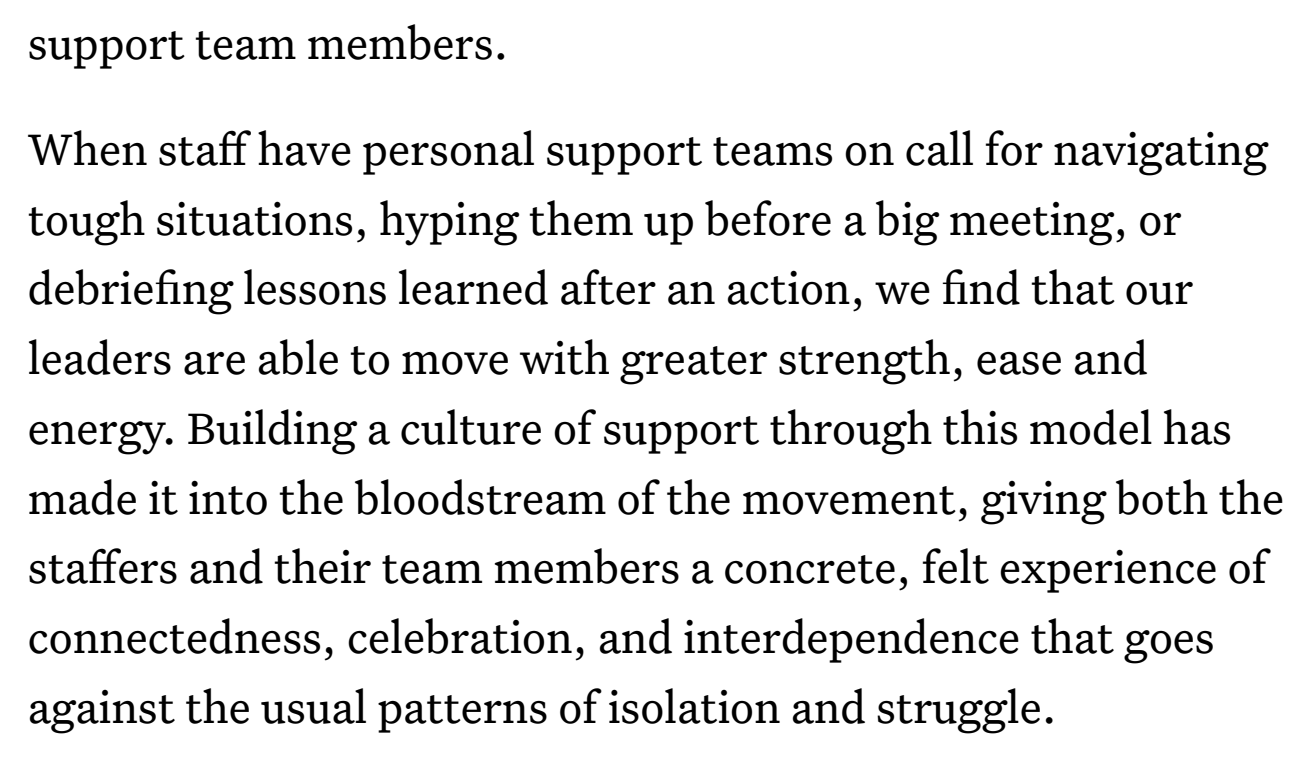
Personal support teams are small teams of people who have a hand at the back of leaders, ready to catch them, cheer them on, and remind them they are not alone. A personal support team is made up of a leader's trusted comrades, people who find it joyful to offer their friend support and meet approximately once per month.

Unlike the role of a supervisor or formal mentor, personal support teams are not set up to be managers or offer expert advice. Instead, a personal support team exists to: Remind the key person that they are strong and capable, break the perception that leaders have to be perfect, mirror back to the person just how good and worthy they are of care, and offer space to strategize and workshop potentially sticky situations.

While often hidden behind the scenes, this layer of supportive infrastructure within organizations — and for individuals holding significant leadership — was lifted up over and over again as a key reason why leaders were able to stay in their roles, feel their power, and be bold, creative and collaborative.

In 2018, we worked alongside IfNotNow staffers to arrange their own personal support teams. Four years later, 23 people have developed some kind of personal support team as members of the national staff — with 73 people engaged as support team members.

When staff have personal support teams on call for navigating tough situations, hyping them up before a big meeting, or debriefing lessons learned after an action, we find that our leaders are able to move with greater strength, ease and energy. Building a culture of support through this model has made it into the bloodstream of the movement, giving both the staffers and their team members a concrete, felt experience of connectedness, celebration, and interdependence that goes against the usual patterns of isolation and struggle.



IfNotNow members link arms and hold banner at the Liberation Seder in New York City, 2016, declaring #NoLiberationWithOccupation. (IfNotNow)

Lessons learned

A few particular takeaways bubbled up over the course of our experiment with this program. Some names in the following examples have been changed to respect confidentiality.

1. Providing support is rewarding. Madi loved being on Eli's support team. She liked lending a hand to someone she values from a place of unconditional care. She also appreciated building relationships with the other team members she didn't know beforehand and learning from how they approached Eli's questions and challenges. The experience built group cohesion and many of the new relationships continued beyond the boundaries of the team. As you read this, consider who you might gift the opportunity to support you.

2. Support teams are versatile. Each person's team will take a unique shape because support means different things to each person. Dani used her team to plan and execute her transition out of IfNotNow. Her team members helped her design and facilitate a ritual to mark her time with the organization. The outcome was a joyous celebration of her contributions with her community. Meanwhile, Yonah used his team to integrate constructive performance feedback. With the backing of his team, Yonah successfully adopted new behaviors and emerged confidently from what could have been an isolating experience. How might you benefit from a support team?

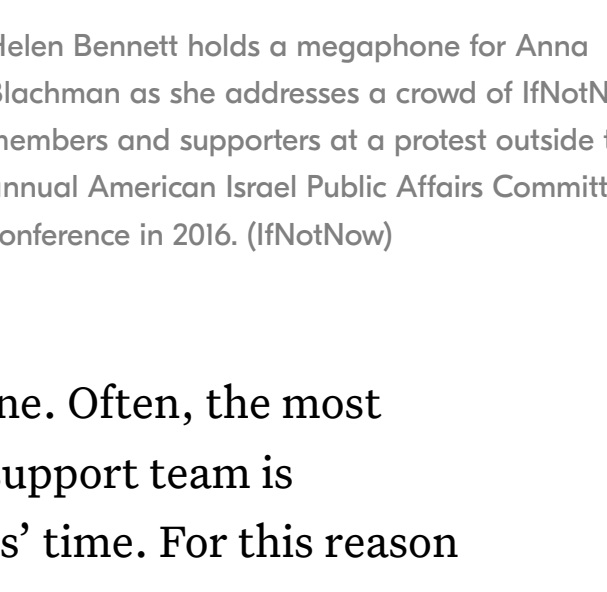
3. Teams are not impervious to wider systems of oppression. For example, teams primarily consisted of female and nonbinary people, and team coordinators were overwhelmingly female and nonbinary as well. Additionally, we noticed a trend that male staff often have trouble asking for help. We started training team members to look for and interrupt gender socialization patterns that encourage women to take care of others. We also began coaching male staff to open up, show vulnerability and practice asking for help. What obstacles would you be on the lookout for in your organization?

4. Teams contribute to a tapestry of many types of support. To be clear, personal support teams are not a substitute for good human resources, humane working hours and expectations — or a supportive organizational culture. For the leader at the top of the organization who shoulders the most responsibility and might feel the most isolated, we found that more specialized and consistent support was needed, such as hiring an executive coach or consultants with technical expertise. Additionally, the team model is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Some people we worked with opted for one-on-one support instead. Still, by institutionalizing personal support teams among IfNotNow staff, the model pushed everyone to consider what support they might need. This practice centered support as a core value and wove it more deeply into the organizational culture. How might personal support teams fit into the larger tapestry of support in your organization?

In our experience, effective personal support teams boil down to three "C"s:

- **Clarity**: How clear are you about the type of support you want? How effectively have you communicated your needs to your team?
- **Consistency**: How consistently does the team meet? How reliably does the Coordinator follow up?
- **Connection**: How well do team members know each other beyond their relationship to you, the supportee?

Getting started



Helen Bennett holds a megaphone for Anna Blachman as she addresses a crowd of IfNotNow members and supporters at a protest outside the annual American Israel Public Affairs Committee conference in 2016. (IfNotNow)

We believe everyone is worthy of support, and anyone can benefit from having a personal support team. For that reason, we wanted to offer a few suggestions for how you might go about setting one up. If your mind is suddenly racing with resistance and uncertainty, you're not alone. Just imagine for a moment how it would would feel to have more dedicated support. What might be possible with a team at your back?

1. Decide that you deserve support. The work you're doing is big and hard. You don't have to do it alone. Often, the most challenging part of creating a personal support team is believing that you're worth other peoples' time. For this reason especially, we encourage you to find a friend to be your cheerleader and accountability partner as you set up your personal support team.

2. Identify what you'd like help with. Having clarity about the challenges, questions or types of support you're looking for will help you choose the right team members and give everyone a sense of focus once you begin. For example:

- If you're feeling isolated, you might choose support team members who understand what you're going through.
- If you need help thinking through technical challenges that arise in your job, mentors or people in similar roles at other organizations might be your best bet.
- If you're considering a job transition, it might be helpful to have people on your team who can help you reflect on your strengths in multiple settings.

Clarity will also emerge and shift over time, so don't get stuck here if you're feeling uncertain.

3. Brainstorm potential support team members. Now it's time to dream up your dream team! Cast a wide net, and don't worry yet about whether or not they'll say yes: high school besties, college organizing buddies, colleagues you've connected with at past jobs or conferences, people whose work you admire. Choose people who are well-matched to your goals, who you trust deeply, and who you'll be excited to see each month. Personal support teams work best when you are comfortable enough to show up fully in all of your messiness.

4. Make your asks. Asking your friends and colleagues to join your personal support team is probably the hardest step of the whole process. It can feel incredibly uncomfortable to step outside the model of one-for-one exchange and self-interest we usually operate within, and ask someone to devote an hour of their busy lives to you each month. Remember, people want to contribute. Whether or not they can join your support team right now, they love and believe in you, and they believe in your work.

5. Identify a team coordinator and start meeting. As you assemble your team, it's critical to ask one responsible person to play the role of team coordinator. Your coordinator will schedule monthly meetings, check in with you about the agenda as they approach, and generally keep the ball rolling so you can simply show up and receive support. Your team coordinator should not be you! We've realized that when we have to take on the coordination of our own support, we often deprioritize it. Even when you don't prioritize your own support, your coordinator will.

After a first meeting where everyone gets to know each other and learns more about what's going on, monthly meetings can be simple, focused on whatever you need that month. This is your time, so make it work for you.

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Support is contagious

When we developed the personal support team model for IfNotNow, we imagined a movement where robust support for every leader would mean a more resilient and powerful movement.

Support spreads across our movement ecosystem. We've collaborated with organizers in IfNotNow's sibling movements Cosecha, Sunrise and Never Again Action to launch their own personal support team infrastructure. It's not uncommon for organizers across these sibling movements to be on each other's teams.

Support also spreads on an interpersonal level. When Liz started working on the personal support team project, she convinced her organizer wife to start her own. Their friend Miriam heard about it and realized how valuable a personal support team would be as she launched an innovative mental health practice. "Having a support team has helped me get further, get unstuck from hard decisions and accomplish more than I would have alone," Miriam reflected.

As the model sparked the interest of more and more people, doing work of all kinds, our imagination grew. What would our movements look like if every leader and volunteer had the care and support of three trusted comrades? What would our world look like if every single mechanic, politician, nurse and parent had a personal support team? What might be possible if we all felt fully supported?

Let's build that world, one team at a time.

Liz Aeschlimann

Liz Aeschlimann helps people step off the productivity and exhaustion treadmill and design new professional and personal possibilities as a coach and facilitator. An organizer, educator and chaplain, she has served as Director for Jewish Life at Vassar College and received a Masters of Divinity from Harvard Divinity School. Learn more at lizaeschlimann.com.

Helen Bennett

Helen Bennett likes to do things that help people remember how much it's worth it to trust and depend on each other. She is an organizer, facilitator, network weaver, Spiritual Director, and co-creator of IfNotNow. In 2018 she co-founded and now co-leads Tzedek Lab, a national network of political educators, organizers, spiritual leaders, and cultural workers building collective competency to politicize, transform, and inspire the Jewish community into collective action against racism, antisemitism, and white supremacy. Learn more at tzedeklab.org.

Andrew Gordon-Kirsch

Andrew Gordon-Kirsch is a leadership coach specializing in feedback and behavior change. He has spent the last decade helping people navigate the unknowns of transitions, first as a community organizer and later as an organization development consultant. He has led workshops on antisemitism and Islamophobia and contributed to the founding of IfNotNow. He recently served as the Interim Executive Director of Jewish Youth for Community Action. Learn more at andrewgk.com.

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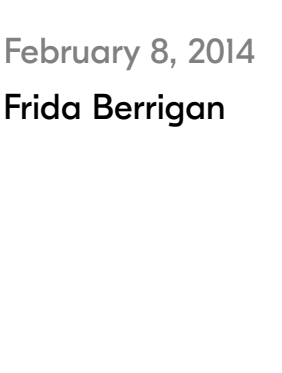

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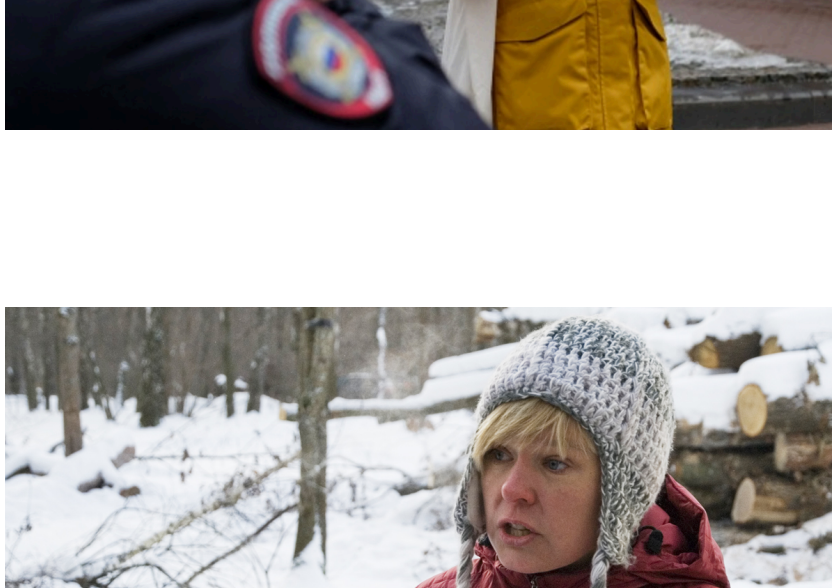

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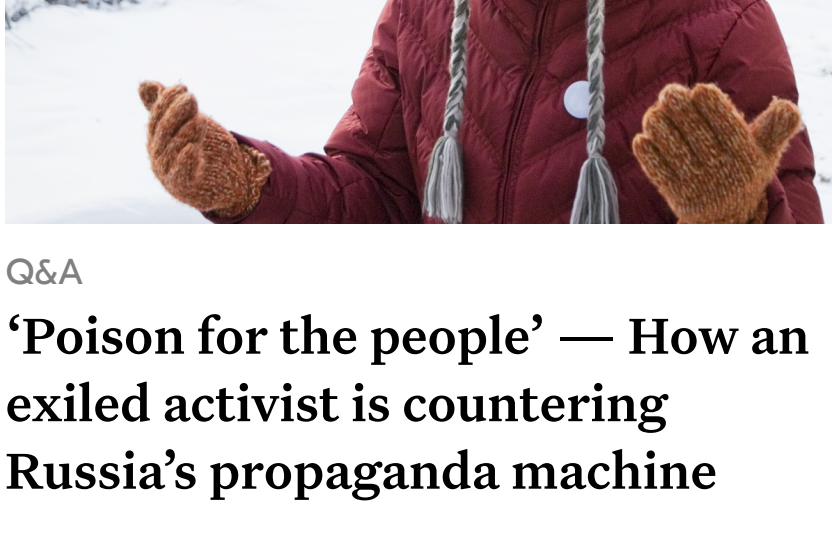

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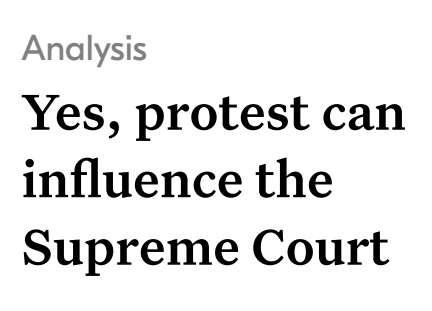

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