Crafting a Support Network as a Founder and CEO

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Sometime in late 2018, the concept of having a support network clicked for me. This was the year that I started working with Mandy, my second Executive Assistant. Caryn, who I worked with in that capacity for around a year and a half, had transitioned to lead Finance. The gap without this type of support helped me to reflect on the most ideal setup.

The journey to a support network

The first time around that I worked with an Executive Assistant, I had the thought that they could help me by taking on a lot of tasks I had been doing myself. And this is true in many ways. The second time around, I realized that the ultimate way an EA can help me to scale is to be a key partner in creating a support network around myself.

Rather than having my EA take on my tax filings, the best thing they can do is help me to find three people I can meet to decide on a great financial advisor to work with long-term. And this approach can be taken in many areas, and can be done yourself, without an EA. I now believe that the best way to reach your potential in life, is to form a support network for yourself and cultivate it over time.

In some ways, even thinking about getting this type of support feels like a privilege, and it is. At the same time, I believe thinking in this way should be something for everyone, at least in some form. We've all had mentors and people who have supported us in various ways, we've had parents or

grandparents play that role. And for specific needs, we have people we can turn to: we have a dentist and a GP. We just may not have thought about this as a support network we cultivate and intentionally craft. And as a key example of one aspect of a support network, I'd argue, most of us should have a therapist.

Dedicated vs natural support

Friends and a partner are great pieces of your support network, too. But there's a risk to over-reliance on those people to support you in tough times. It can take a toll on them, and it may line up with a tough time for them too.

In that sense, having naturally existing relationships as your only support can be risky and put you in a more vulnerable spot. Personally, I found that having a therapist I met with regularly helped me to process and work through some of my challenges and thereby have those challenges better formed and be in a more healthy place to discuss them in a different way with my partner.

This doesn't mean to hold back from sharing challenges with a partner or friends, and often I do. In general, you communicate more regularly with your partner and friends than you meet with a therapist, so it's likely that you'd share with them first. However, knowing that you'll meet with your therapist in a few days helps to relieve some of the stress you feel and the urgency to find a solution. And when you do speak with your therapist, you have an opportunity to approach the challenge from a different perspective.

Relying on your co-founder for everything

I've found that having a co-founder also makes it easy to avoid getting more dedicated support such as a therapist or a coach. When you have a co-founder, it's easy to rely on them for all of these support functions. This is a wonderful aspect

of having a co-founder, they can be your best supporter. It’s also easy to build this reliance, because your co-founder is likely someone you speak with more than anyone else, perhaps even a spouse.

Not having a coach in the final year or two of working with my co-founder is something I consider a mistake. As we both became more burned out, and our vision for the company and natural choices of approach diverged, we couldn’t be the ones to help each other with those specific challenges. While I think the outcome to part ways was always going to be the right one, having a coach would likely have made the journey to that result smoother.

A key risk with over-reliance on natural relationships for support, is that they are not necessarily the best people to help you. They won’t be the best therapist, or the best coach, or the best financial advisor you could get. Additionally, these relationships are two-way streets. You can’t take too much otherwise it will feel one-sided and imbalanced.

Types of support to consider

Here are some of the types of support I’ve put in place for myself in the past couple of years:

- Therapist
- Coach
- Executive Assistant
- Financial Advisor / CPA
- Peer founder / CEO group
- Surfing and kite-surfing instructors
- House cleaning

Other types of support I’m considering putting in place in coming years:

- Personal trainer
- Language tutor

In general, instructors and tutors fall into an overall category of being taught, which is something I've increasingly been leaning into. For my last few surf vacations, mainly due to Jess' suggestion / request, I've had lessons almost every day. And there's no doubt that I progressed faster than alone.

Of course, for most of us, cost is a key factor here. It is worth, however, establishing some of these relationships even if you do not set up regular sessions, even if you only have a one-off session.

As an example, I worked closely with a therapist for around two years. Since mid-2019, I've not met regularly with my therapist and have used some of the tools she introduced me to. However, I know that if I ever have a specific issue, or want to have regular sessions again for a few months, I can reach out to her. Having that existing relationship makes the barrier much lower for the future.

There are a couple of other benefits in getting professional support. Firstly, they will have their own network of other people who can help. For example, my financial advisor is connected to a group of people specialized in various different aspects, and was able to connect me with an attorney to help set up a trust. Secondly, if you set up regular sessions it will add a layer of accountability for yourself in that area, be it having your finances more in order or studying a language.

Start sooner than you think

If you're an individual, it may feel like overkill to get some of this type of help in place. However, many of these elements of support are most effective as preventative measures, rather than necessary measures. It's best to get them in place before a crisis, as the people you connect with can be ready and have relevant context, or even help you avoid the crisis in the first place.

And as a founder / CEO, I personally wish I had started to work on my personal support network much sooner. If you have a growing organization, don’t wait too long. As a founder, you generally get everything off the ground yourself and play every role. This can gear you up to have a mindset of solving everything yourself. But, if your company is starting to grow, if you’re starting to hire people, I’d recommend building your support network now. It will help you scale more smoothly, will make the journey feel calmer, and will equip you better for issues that will inevitably arise.

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