

Collaborating to Build a Modern City: Bloomberg i-teams in Jerusalem

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An Interview with Jonah Shrock

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Sharone April is the director of the JLM i-team on behalf of Bloomberg Philanthropies. Previously she served as a senior strategic and organizational consultant at Points9 (a subsidiary of Lotem Strategies), where she spent six years working with approximately 40 authorities and government ministries as the director of public sector clients in the firm, and oversaw long-term strategic-organizational processes, with an emphasis on integration and implementation.

Dena Scher is the JLM i-team's media and communications manager, focusing on the international press and social media. The JLM i-team, founded and funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies, is a senior consulting team that reports directly to the Mayor of Jerusalem and works to tackle strategic targets and seemingly intractable problems related to the chosen areas of youth-at-risk, creative public space, fostering business opportunities, education and building active communities.

Brown Journal of World Affairs: Can you give a general overview of what innovation teams (i-teams) do for cities and why they were originally created?

Dena Scher: The i-team program was founded by Bloomberg Philanthropies, and it came from a realization Michael Bloomberg reached when he was mayor of New York City: city halls are primarily involved with the here and now—daily operations, dealing with emergencies. They often don't have the time or space

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to deal with and come up with innovative solutions to long-existing problems. So his philanthropic organization, Bloomberg Philanthropies, came up with the i-teams model. They give grants to cities of a particular size that fulfill a particular number of criteria. And these grants are for three years, helping set up an i-team, which serves as a strategic team that functions as consultants to the mayor of that city. These teams address challenges that are set forth by that mayor and work on solutions side by side with city hall.

Journal: Could you elaborate on how, functionally speaking, you complement and collaborate with city hall?

Sharone April: We use a very simple model that has four steps. The first step is investigating the problems thoroughly, through both qualitative and quantitative methods. The second step is ideation: thinking with the city staff, stakeholders, and users about what possible solutions are available. It also involves looking internationally and nationally at existing solutions in other cities. The third phase is narrowing down and selecting the project or initiative that both impacts the city residents the most and has a high level of feasibility. Because the team is in place for three years, we're looking at medium-range solutions. And the fourth and most innovative part of the model is actually implementation: making sure the initiative is carried through and implemented by the city. And all

2

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of this is built and executed closely in collaboration with owners and sponsors from the city. Owners are the personnel that will actually run the program once the i-team hands the innovations over and moves on

to other projects. The sponsors are usually higher city hall management that encourages and wants the project to succeed, so they work very closely with the city staff and solve problems along the way as needed.

Journal: What urban issue do you think is most pressing and unique to Jerusalem today?

Scher: Well Jerusalem is unique, so we have many unique issues. I think that may be the reason that internationally, having Jerusalem known as a unique case is actually not one of the problems that we're working on. You know, things like security and things like the conflict: those are very long-term things that

are dealt with on the federal government level. We're dealing with city-oriented issues, just as any other city.

April: I think the uniqueness is really human centered and involves seeing residents from all of the different populations—the Arab, ultra-orthodox, and general populations. Through their perspective, we work on issues that are relevant to all populations. One example is really working on public space and adding a layer of not just physical space, but also a layer of community activities to that public space. And one thing that characterizes Jerusalem is that we have many neighborhoods—very separate neighborhoods. Although we have amazing cultural institutions in the city, they're less accessible to many people, such as the underprivileged population.

Scher: Jerusalem is actually a very poor city. That's not something that everyone knows.

April: So one of the things we've come up with and which was actually implemented last November and December is the Festival on Wheels—we call it *Zaza*, which means “move” in Hebrew. We brought content to 17 different neighborhoods in the afternoons and had arts, culture, and science activities. If it was possible, we did it outdoors, in public spaces. If it was cold and rainy, we did it in community centers. But we actually made this content available and accessible to all the populations in the different neighborhoods.

Scher: What was innovative about this, first of all, was that it was free. It's not that community centers don't have activities for residents, but these were free events, and they were quality events. We weren't just setting up balloon blowers; these were real arts and sciences events. And an innovative thing was that it was really cross-sectoral. It was in Arab neighborhoods, it was in ultra-orthodox neighborhoods, and it was in what we call the “general population” neighborhoods. In certain neighborhoods, people are used to having creative uses of public space. And in certain neighborhoods, let's say the ultra-orthodox neighborhoods, they're not used to this kind of use of their public space, so it introduces them to new ways to use these spaces.

April: And although this was unique for Jerusalem, this can be implemented in, and is relevant to, all cities in the world because it demonstrates how to get quality art, culture, sports, and other content to the distant neighborhoods, to

populations that are deprived and don't have access to such content.

Journal: Could you offer a couple other specific examples of what you are building in Jerusalem targeted at specific problems?

April: Another thing that, again, is unique to Jerusalem but is also relevant to all of Israel is food trucks. For the first year and a half we worked on economic development and youth-at-risk, which is a wicked problem the city faces. And we worked on two areas of economic development. One is how to make the city more attractive for business owners and entrepreneurs. The other is how to make the city more attractive for its residents, and that was where the Festival on Wheels fit in. So when we were looking at what a business owner or entrepreneur needs in the city, one of the things we discovered is that there is a bad image of Jerusalem as a place of doing business; there's no ecosystem of business owners and companies and employees meeting each other. One of the things that Israel is currently lacking, and that we in Jerusalem don't have, is food trucks. Food trucks in Israel are prohibited because of the Health Ministry.

4

Scher: It imposes somewhat draconian regulations that need to be updated but haven't yet been updated.

April: One of the things we noticed is that, in a number of the large business districts, most employees enter work in the building in the morning, leave it at night, have no interaction with other employees, and feel alone in the city. So one of the projects we've been working on for the past year is introducing food trucks in the form of a "band" to the city. These involve five to seven local restaurants that form a food truck band. And for lunch in the afternoon, they set up and sell in business districts, encouraging employees to come and eat, thus creating a nice ecosystem. In the evenings, the band of trucks roams around Jerusalem to different neighborhoods.

Scher: This includes outlying neighborhoods where a strong commercial front is currently lacking. This also allows the businesses, the restaurants themselves, to test out new concepts with the public.

April: So again, it's introducing an existing concept that works elsewhere to this city and answering the various needs of business owners, restaurant owners, and residents in Jerusalem neighborhoods.

Journal: Backtracking a little bit to something you mentioned earlier with the *Zaza* initiative, did you find any sort of backlash or hostility from the *Haredi* population to its presence in their neighborhoods?

April: On the contrary, because we are—we have to be—culturally sensitive, each activity was adjusted to fit the local population. So, only relevant activities were brought into the ultra-orthodox and Arab communities.

Scher: Culturally sensitive but still at a high level. We used the science museum as an operator for the *Haredi* events, which is kind of amazing. But there was also a man who specializes in cultural events for the *Haredi* public. On the one hand he produces high quality cultural events. On the other hand, he is a *Haredi* person who knows to make the proper adjustments. And that was what made it amazing. It wasn't trying to impose a certain kind of culture onto sectors of the cities that wouldn't be comfortable with it. It's keeping a high level of cultural content while being culturally sensitive.

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5

April: It was a huge success in each of these locations, and we had many people—anywhere between 150 and 400 participants took part in each event.

Scher: And these were meant to be small events; they were meant to have 150–200 people.

Journal: Specifically regarding the Palestinian population of Jerusalem, the majority doesn't really recognize the Jerusalem government. Even though the population is allowed to vote, most of them choose not to. What specifically do you do to try to get the Palestinian population to be more receptive to your initiatives?

April: We collaborated with the community centers. The community centers are accepted by the local population, and they receive services there. This way they could take part comfortably and, again, not feel like it was imposed on them against their will.

Scher: Right; it was about partnerships. We also have the advantage of being

separate but not separate from the municipality. You brand something as the Jerusalem i-team, and it's not necessarily seen as the municipality, which we used as we needed to. We also insist on making all of our initiatives cross-sectoral, meaning that we don't always go with what's easy. It is harder to work in East Jerusalem, where the perceptions are more challenging, where the issues are more difficult, where there's been 70 years of a certain level of neglect. But the point is to try to do all of our initiatives in East Jerusalem as well, just working together with partners on the ground to make sure that it works for them.

April: And the way we do it is using a lot of prototyping and modeling. We try something, usually small. This was a relatively small initiative. We prototyped

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it. We saw if it was working and how it was working, what the best content was and what the levels of participation were. And once considered a success, it was integrated into the city budget to be duplicated and scaled up later this

6

year. That's the way we do it. We do small-scale testing, and if it's successful, we have many partners and everyone wants to take part in it. If the prototypes fail, that's okay as well because we learn; it's in our territory. If it doesn't work out, we learn from it, and then we go on to try again until we succeed.

Scher: And our initiatives are lean. I mean they're relatively low budget; they're quick to implement.

April: And they're fun!

Scher: But that's kind of the point. Because when they succeed, everybody wants to be a part of the success. That's when they really start making an impact, when people go from thinking, "Oh, this is a small initiative the Jerusalem i-team is doing," to "Oh! This is successful; let's make this a main calendar event for next year in the Jerusalem budget." That's what we're hoping for: ideas that are small in scale but large in concept. And they're very data driven; we do a high level of research beforehand.

Journal: You talked earlier about how you're hoping to make Jerusalem more attractive to small businesses, and when people think of the economic dynamism

or start-up culture of Israel, they typically think of cities like Tel Aviv. Do you see a big potential for Jerusalem to shift into something more in line with the image that Tel Aviv has cultivated as a modern, youthful, and economically dynamic city?

Scher: Yes. And I'll give you an example of the Jerusalem high-tech community. This is not an area that we act in, but it's an example of how a small but very quality high-tech community that Jerusalem now has was definitely shadowed by the massive startup nation in Tel Aviv for many years, until the quality of the companies coming out of Jerusalem and the quality of the startups began making their mark on the world stage. Now, we're considered one of the up-and-coming startup capitals of the world. And it's just about hard work, persistence, and quality.

April: And community.

Scher: What you were mentioning before about working on keeping quality residents in this city—it's a big focus of ours. Jerusalem naturally attracts very talented people with its amazing universities and art schools. Along with most of the NGOs in Israel. You have some of the most amazing people in Jerusalem, and the question is how do you make them stay and continue to thrive, do amazing things for the city, and be active members of the community. Then you can have a quality city.

April: Regarding our initiatives, we are very much for copying good ideas that exist elsewhere and integrating them into the city. And now some of our ideas and some of our projects are starting to be copied elsewhere. I strongly believe that innovation is always a means; it's not the final destination. It's making a higher quality of life for residents—that's our goal. Innovation doesn't have to necessarily involve technology; it just has to make the residents' lives better. We have around 20 such initiatives that are doing that and are making the city a better place to be. So we're definitely hoping that other cities will continue to express interest in what we're doing—copying it, taking it, and making Israel a better place to live.

Journal: Could you elaborate more on your at-risk-youth initiative?

April: Youth-at-risk is a complicated, wicked problem for a variety of reasons.

The first reason is that there are many different units inside city hall and outside NGOs that are working on it from different perspectives, different definitions. And over the years, there was no one definition of youth-at-risk, and there was no data whatsoever on this topic. So that's the background. A year and a half ago—September 2015—there was a very harsh TV report on Channel 10 about youth-at-risk in Jerusalem and homeless youth-at-risk, so the mayor started a task force and asked us to lead it. We did a few things: We first gathered data. For the first time, we categorized all existing, operational programs in the city by neighborhood, seeing what worked for which gender, for which age, and on the risk spectrum, whether the program was high risk or preventative. We first got a visual of what's working where for different populations, along with where we're missing programs and where we have too many programs in the same area. Then we started talking to professionals and to the youth themselves. We created a very simple mechanism involving a field team, who come into daily contact with the youth, and a strategic team of directors who collaborate to create solutions based on data and information received from the field. We started the mechanism by targeting homelessness. The first thing we did was map, by name, all youth-at-risk the field team interacted with and then collectively define who the case manager for each youth would be. The idea was that more NGOs and more units working with youth-at-risk would translate into better services. But what actually happened was that the youth-at-risk used this unit's services in the morning, and in the afternoon they got lunch from this unit, and then in the evening they went to a shelter. And the quality wasn't good; they didn't get the best services.

8

Scher: It wasn't a unified approach to each youth because they were using a variety of services.

April: Yeah. So the first thing was mapping by name and having one of the field member employees take responsibility and identify his or herself as the case manager for each youth. The case manager's responsibility was not only contacting the youth, but also really looking on a higher level and seeing what services exist in the city, and what the best treatment plan for the specific youth is. So that's one level. Then we have data, and we have information. The second level is backing the field team up with the strategic team made up of directors of the different units, internally from the municipality and externally from NGOs. They get the data from the field team and have the power to allocate budgets to make decisions and policy from the actual needs that are coming from the

field. And together these paired strategic and field team members are actually enabling the youth to get better treatment.

Scher: For example, one of the things that came up is that in the city center we're missing two shelters: one for boys and one for girls. As a result, two shelters are now being built, and the first should be open at the end of April due to the collaboration between the field, the different units, and the strategic team. This mechanism is working so well that it's now going to be implemented in six different neighborhoods throughout the city. This combination of field and strategic teams will get real data on what's happening in the neighborhoods and then allocate budgets and think strategically about what can be done in those specific neighborhoods.

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Journal: Let's move to education. The educational system is somewhat top-down in Israel, and initiatives are created at the government level and then are implemented down at the school level. You've written that you're trying to work on a teacher-centered model with more autonomy for teachers and schools. Can you talk a little bit about how, in effect, the i-team's education initiatives are implemented?

9

April: These are new sets of priorities. After a year and a half, we needed to move into new priorities, handing off our previous initiatives to the city owners and sponsors. One of the areas we're working on is education. As you described, the education system is very much top-down in Israel, and one of the initiatives we're trying is what we call mini-Bloomberg. This means implementing our model—the four steps—with a specific school in collaboration with teachers and principals. Teachers really are agents of change, because they are still the ones who are facing the classroom and are alone with the students for anywhere from 45 minutes to an hour at a time. They have the ability to change their classrooms. We're now working with four schools in the Arab and general sectors. We're entering schools we are invited to, and we go through the four phases with the teachers. First is investigating what the problem is—finding the school's most urgent problems and needs. Next is really thinking together about what we can solve and how we can solve that specific problem. Third is building an implementation plan; fourth is really carrying it through until implementation.

SHARONE APRIL AND DENA SCHER

This way, the school has a lot of autonomy, and it's really bottom-up. They can decide what they want to focus on in order to improve the school environment.

Scher: It's about allowing them to come up with solutions to their problems on their own terms. Our tools simply help them out along the way.

April: And again, they're responsible; they're the owners of the process. We're just helping to facilitate building the structure and the process. But it's their projects and their initiative.