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THE HIDDEN COST OF KEEPING THE FOUNDER AT THE CENTER OF EVERYTHING.

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When I first wrote this, it was one long paper.

Then I remembered, founders don't have an uninterrupted hour to sit and just read. You're probably squeezing this in before your next meeting, while you're waiting for someone to join a call, or hoping nobody walks in with, "Have you got two minutes?"

So, read this part.

The rest can wait until you've got another ten minutes.

> “Why does everything come back to me?”

I have heard some version of that question from founders too many times. Usually, they are exhausted and genuinely confused. They hired good people. Experienced people. People they trust. They have added leaders, created roles and handed over responsibilities, yet somehow the decisions, questions and problems keep travelling upward.

The founder is still copied on the email, pulled into the meeting and asked to review the work. When the room gets quiet and someone needs to make the call, everyone still looks at them.

Over time, the frustration starts to turn toward the people around them. Why won’t they take ownership? Why can’t they just make a decision? Why am I still doing this?

I have spent a lot of my career walking into conversations at exactly this point. By the time I arrive, everyone usually has a theory: communication, accountability, capacity, leadership, process. They often have a fairly strong view of who or what is causing them.

My first response is usually simple.
“Everyone… slow it down. Tell me what’s going on.”

Once the noise settles, the challenge often looks very different. The business has grown, the people may have changed and the org chart has probably changed several times. Underneath all of it, though, the company is still operating remarkably close to the way it did when the founder could hold almost everything in their head.

The business grew. The way it operates did not.

In the early years, having the founder at the centre is an extraordinary advantage. They know the customer, the product, the history and the standards. They can make a decision in five minutes because they are carrying years of context in their head. They notice when something feels off, solve problems quickly and protect the things that made the business special in the first place.

Of course the business grows around that capability. It works.

The difficulty comes as the company becomes more complex. More people join, more customers arrive and more decisions need to be made every day. A choice in one part of the company starts to affect three others. What was once held together through instinct, memory and proximity now has to be understood by people who were not there when the business began.

Many companies reach this point and keep asking the original system to carry a business it was never designed to support.

The founder becomes the operating system

Founder dependency rarely arrives as a dramatic crisis. It builds quietly through hundreds of perfectly sensible decisions. A team member asks for input because the founder has more context. A leader checks a decision because similar decisions have been changed before. Work comes back for review because the founder can immediately see what good looks like. A problem lands on their desk because they are still the fastest person in the company at solving it.

Every one of those moments makes sense on its own. Together, they teach the organization how to function through one person.

You can hear it in the language people use.

"I do a bit of everything."

"I just do whatever the business needs." "I need to run that by her." "He will know the history." I pay attention to these phrases because they often tell me that ownership, context or decision authority is living somewhere other than the role where the work sits.

The founder gradually becomes the place where gaps are closed. They connect information living in different teams, remember why a decision was made three years ago, arbitrate priorities and calibrate quality. They know which customer is sensitive, which supplier can be pushed and which commitment was made in a conversation nobody documented.

At some point, they are doing far more than leading the business. They have become its operating system.

That is an enormous amount of invisible work, and it is why telling a founder to delegate is usually completely useless advice. Most founders I meet have tried to delegate. Many have hired senior people specifically to take work off their plate. The leader arrives with experience, a strong title and a genuine mandate to own an area of the business.

The tension begins when the formal mandate meets the way the company actually works. The leader does not have all the context. Decision boundaries are fuzzy. The founder still has strong views about the outcome and can see risks the leader cannot yet see. Work comes back for review and decisions are revisited. The leader becomes more cautious, the founder becomes more involved and, within months, both are frustrated.

The founder wonders why they hired someone senior if they are still doing the work. The leader knows they are accountable but becomes increasingly unsure about what they can actually decide.

Everyone else is watching. They notice which decisions get reopened and quickly learn that involving the founder early is the safer option. Nobody needs to tell them to escalate more. The organization teaches them.

This is how capable teams become dependent.

Alright… Go take that meeting or answer the question that only you can answer.

(Or at least the one everyone thinks only you can answer.)

The rest will be here when you get back.