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

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As I was Saying...

There was one conversation I wanted to tell you about.

It started with six words.

> “Gab, I don’t know what to do.

I once had a leader with more than 20 years of experience come to me and say, “Gab, I don’t know what to do.” This was someone with all the confidence and bravado in the world and, occasionally a little too much of both. The person sitting across from me that day looked scared. There was a blankness in their eyes that I had never seen before.

When a leader says they do not know what to do, it can mean a lot of things. They may be choosing between two difficult options, know what they want but cannot figure out how to get people on board, or simply need help seeing the risk. This was different. It was a complete statement. They did not know where to look, where to start, how to take one step forward or even how to take a step back. They were frozen.

In that moment, I could have reassured them and said, “Yes, you do.” I could have helped them work through the decision in front of us, laid out two options and asked them to weigh the risks. Instead, I asked, “Why do you think you don’t know?”

I knew, even if they did not yet, that the sentence was far bigger than the particular topic of the moment. A person who had spent more than 20 years building judgment no longer trusted themselves to use it. Giving them my answer might have solved the question in front of us, but it would also have reinforced the issue.

Perpetual second guessing can eat away at even the strongest leaders. When decisions are constantly checked, tweaked, adjusted or reopened, people start looking for confirmation before they move. Slowly, they begin to question the instincts and judgment that once came naturally.

The part that has stayed with me is that this leader had started to believe they did not know what to do. Given enough time, that belief had started to become true.

I think we misunderstand trust in business. Trusting a leader means trusting their judgment enough to let them take the right risks, make mistakes and navigate what happens next. It cannot be measured by whether they always arrive at the answer you would have chosen.

Every founder I have ever met has made mistakes. They have taken wrong turns, had bad ideas, trusted the wrong person or held onto something longer than they should have. Their capability was built through the skill, intuition and judgment they developed finding their way through those moments.

Then they hire leaders and quietly expect them to arrive at the right answer without being allowed to take the same journey.

I do not think you truly trust someone until you trust that they will make mistakes and believe they can handle what comes after.

Words matter. Voices matter too.

I admit that I have been guilty of this myself. I have taken work from a team and changed one word. One word.

If you had asked me why, I would have given you a very thoughtful answer about how words matter. I still believe that. Anyone who has worked with me for more than five minutes knows I can spend an unreasonable amount of time thinking about a single sentence. There were times I changed the word simply because it was not the word I would have used.

Words matter. That does not mean there is only one right word. Voices matter too.

There is a point where protecting the standard quietly becomes protecting your own fingerprint. Founders are particularly vulnerable to this because the company has their DNA all over it. Their language, judgment, tone and preferences helped build the thing. Allowing someone else's fingerprint to appear can feel surprisingly uncomfortable.

The work can sound different from you and still be right. A decision can be different from the one you would have made and still be a good decision. That distinction matters because trust is experienced through what happens after we say, "I trust you."

If every choice is checked, every word is adjusted and every mistake is prevented before someone has the chance to navigate it, the person on the other side will not experience that as trust. I know because I have had to learn it too.

"Do I have to get rid of everyone?"

A founder once sat with me and asked, "Do I have to get rid of everyone?" There was genuine fear in their voice. They were not angry. They were heartbroken.

They had reached a point where they genuinely believed their entire leadership team might simply be incapable. Somehow, every hiring decision had been wrong. Several people, in different roles and with different backgrounds, were consistently failing to take ownership in exactly the way the founder needed them to.

The conclusion broke their heart, and yet it was the first conclusion they reached.

We slowed it down and looked at what was actually happening. Here were several different people, all experiencing a version of the same problem. Maybe every hiring decision had gone spectacularly wrong. It was possible. But perhaps the people were not the only variable worth looking at.

“Maybe I’m the problem?” the founder said.

We kept going. Maybe nobody was the problem.

Maybe the system just wasn’t working.

This is where it starts to become personal because systems are difficult to be angry with and humans are right there. The founder starts to believe the leaders are not capable, while the leaders start to believe the founder will never trust them. Every new example becomes evidence.

The founder sees a decision escalated and thinks, “See? I knew they wouldn’t own it.” The leader sees a decision changed and thinks, “See? I knew they would step in.” Both sides become more certain and adjust their behaviour accordingly, which only makes the pattern stronger.

Before long, it stops feeling operational. It starts feeling personal. Exceptional leaders begin to doubt their own judgment. Founders become convinced that nobody cares about the business as much as they do.

Neither person is trying to create that outcome. They're both adapting to the way the business has learned to operate.