FOR FOUNDERS OF SCALE - UPS

THE CEO PARENT

How great founders, like great parents, grow what they build by learning to let go

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The CEO Parent

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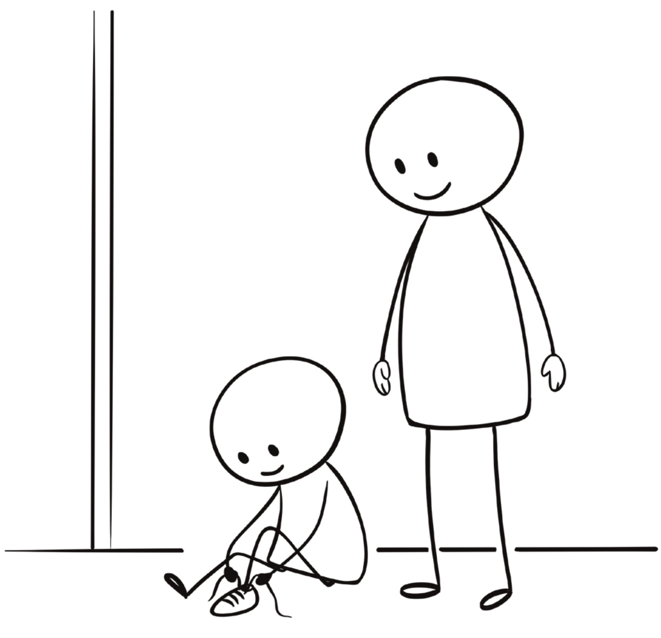
CHAPTER 1

THE BOTTLENECK AT THE TOP

How the founder becomes the ceiling of the company



The Friday before we left for France was not a good day to be around me.

Work that had to be finished before I could leave. Two business calls. Groceries. Bags. A car to load. My youngest was home and wanted to build Duplo castles or draw a cycling track on the driveway. My head was somewhere between my inbox and the boot of the car.

He felt it straight away. By mid-morning he was impossible. When my oldest came home from school that afternoon, they were both impossible. Everything I did made it worse.

The next day, ten hours in the car, all four of us. Easy. Laughing, curious, genuinely together. Nothing had changed about the boys. I had changed, and they had felt it from the moment I walked through the door.

Where your head is determines what happens around you, and that is as true in a company as it is in a car on the way to France.

You have felt your own version of this, even if you have never named it. The week you are stretched thin, the company feels it before you have said a word.

You founded the company, and in the beginning doing everything yourself was the right call. You had the overview. You moved fast. You knew every detail. The company grew because of your knowledge, your speed, your judgement, your ability to hold it all together. Then the company kept growing, and the approach did not.

Most of the founders I work with are Visionaries*. They see possibilities that others miss. They can describe where the company needs to go in a way that makes people want to follow. Early on, that energy was the fuel. Now it has become the ceiling.

Not because the vision is wrong. Because the team has learned that good outcomes and the founder's involvement mean the same thing. When he is in the room, things get decided. When he is not, people wait. Not out of laziness. Out of experience.

Now you are in every meeting that matters. Every escalation finds its way to your desk. Your team is talented. They also wait. They wait because they have learned that you will step in. And they learned that because you always do.

The moment that tells you everything: your team stops surprising you with decisions. Not because they stopped having ideas. Because they learned that waiting is safer than deciding.

You have tried to hand things over. Something went sideways. You stepped back in because it was faster, because the stakes felt too high to wait. It was never a plan, just what happened one moment at a time, until your team quietly concluded that your involvement was the safest outcome. That waiting was smarter than deciding.

You see it in small moments, every day.

**Rocket Fuel, by Gino Wickman and Mark C. Winters, describes the working relationship between a Visionary and an Integrator. The Visionary sets direction and generates energy; the Integrator turns it into execution. The Integrator role is the one I know best and have most often played myself, working alongside visionary founders to turn their direction into something the organisation can actually run on.*

Your sales manager sends you the proposal before it goes to the client. You told him three months ago he does not need to. He sends it anyway. Not because he doubts the content. Because your eyes on it is what safe feels like.

Your operations lead arrives at the leadership team meeting with three options on the table. No recommendation. Just options. Waiting for you to pick, because picking without you has gone wrong before.

In Practice

He called during his vacation.

He was on a sunny beach somewhere in Spain with his family. We spent twenty minutes on the phone discussing where a button should sit on a screen in the new ERP system.

A button. On a screen.

Somewhere back at the office, one of his team members was working out how to connect three separate databases. That was the real problem. That was what the entire implementation depended on. His team was solving it. Without him.

He was not thinking about the databases. He had an opinion about the button.

This was not just a man working through his vacation. He had given one of his people clear ownership of the entire implementation, start to finish. That was the agreement. And here he was, calling from abroad to rearrange a button on a screen. What that tells the team is not that he cares. It tells them that ownership means nothing. That no matter what they are handed, he will still find a way back in.

And as long as he does, they will never build something better than he could have imagined.

After we hung up, I sat with it. Then I called him back.

I told him I was not going to talk about the button anymore. I told him he had a problem. Not a business problem. A letting-go problem. His team was capable. They did not need him on holiday. They needed him to trust the decision they would make.

He was quiet for a moment. Then he said: You're right. I just can't turn it off.

The penny dropped. He went quiet. Then he let go, and his team finished the implementation without him.

We still use it today. When he starts to drift back, when his attention moves towards something that belongs to someone else, one of us says it. The button. He knows what it means, and he pulls back.

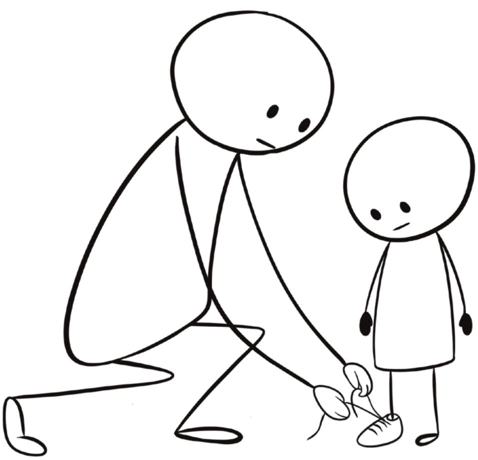
Sometimes that is all it takes. Here is what it costs.

Not the vacation you took but never had, not the evenings you came home but were not present. Those matter, but they are not the real price.

The real price is paid by the people around you.

Every time you step back in, something dies quietly. Not the decision itself. The impulse to make one. Your team learns, slowly and without ever saying it out loud, that their judgement is provisional. That the room is never really theirs. That the safest version of any situation is one where you have seen and approved the outcome.

And so they stop reaching, gradually and without fanfare. They bring you options instead of decisions. They wait instead of acting. They check instead of choosing.



You look at this and see a team that lacks initiative. They look at you and see a founder who has never fully handed over the wheel. Both are right, and neither is saying it out loud.

The deepest cost is not what you are missing. It is what they never get to become. A team that is never trusted with the real thing never finds out what it is capable of. And a company whose ceiling is the founder's personal bandwidth has a very clear limit on how far it can go.

The Parenting Parallel

My oldest son struggled with his shoelaces for weeks. Every evening we practised. Every evening he got frustrated.

My instinct was to help. Four seconds and we could move on. I had been doing exactly that every single morning, stepping in, tying the laces, moving on. Because it was faster.

Because I had other things to get to.

The same head I had on the Friday before France.

One morning I stayed back. “Just try. I’m here.” It took thirty minutes. He fumbled. He adjusted. He tried again. Eventually, he tied them himself.

Something shifted. He had proven something to himself that I had been quietly taking from him every time I stepped in to make things faster.

The founder who never makes this shift does not fail spectacularly. He just gets busier. Five years later, the company is bigger, the team more capable on paper, and he is still in every room where anything important happens, still the one who cannot turn it off.

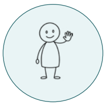
That is probably not the version of this story you want.

The real question is not whether your current approach works. It probably does. The question is whether you are still where you want to be. You built this to do the work only you could do. Now look at a normal week. How much of it is that, and how much is holding everything together, deciding what others could decide, and fixing what you are not even the best at fixing? Somewhere in the growth, you stopped spending your days on the reason you started. And none of that changes until the company can run without you.

> **CEO Parent Principle:**
>
> *Every time you answer before your team has finished thinking, you solve a problem and prevent a capability from being built.*

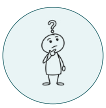
The CEO Parent Shift

The shift is not from involvement to absence. It is from being the answer to building the conditions where others find the answer themselves.

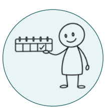


What to Stop Doing: Stop stepping in the moment something feels slower or messier than you would like. The discomfort is not a sign that things are going wrong. It is a sign that someone is learning.

What to Start Practising: When a problem lands on your desk, ask, "What do you think we should do?" before you say anything. Then stay quiet long enough for an answer to emerge.



Reflection Question: Where has your company quietly learned that waiting for you is safer than deciding without you?



This Week's Practice: This week, pick one decision that lands on your desk out of habit. Hand it back with a clear outcome and the boundaries that matter. Then do not check on it.

The next chapter is about what changes when it can. What it looks like when people think for themselves, make decisions, and own the outcome. Not because they are exceptional. Because someone built the space that made it possible.