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The Role of the Founder/CEO: You Have One Job

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9-11 minutes

Most people have a certain image in their minds when they think of a [founder](#)/CEO.

They picture the boss in the corner office, standing behind her desk, gazing out over the city. They imagine someone calling all the shots, and everyone relying on their insight and wisdom — a visionary who is never wrong. They fear being grilled, berated, and guilted into working long hours — inevitable top-down command-and-control.

When [startup](#) founders take this approach today, they fail.

In my experience, this couldn't be further from the true purpose of the role.

Yet, too many founders fall into the trap of trying to live out this image — and I've seen their startups underperform or even fold as a result.

Over the past decade, I have founded and exited two companies — *Increo* and *Crashlytics* — and then stayed on to build large teams at the acquirers — *Box* and *Twitter*. And as an angel investor in 30+ startups and entrepreneurs, I have had the opportunity to see the role's function outside of myself, and the successes and challenges that different founders' approaches beget.

Through these experiences, I've learned that the humbling role of the founder is about putting others in a position to succeed beyond their wildest dreams. Your role as a founder isn't to be in charge of everything, all the time. In fact, it's the opposite.

The more involved you are with the day-to-day work, the more difficult it will be for you to scale, and the less likely it is that your company will succeed.

Every founder believes they have no time, they have too many priorities, and they have 100 different roles they need to play. I disagree.

As the founder/CEO, you have one job: Look at where you're spending your time, then fire yourself from that position.

Here's what I've learned that makes this possible:

1. Perform The Role, Then Hire Someone Better

The best founder/CEOs are jacks-of-all-trades.

Their value doesn't come from doing one single thing exceedingly well. It comes from being able to perform an array of things fairly well, and then having the awareness to find someone better than them to take over those responsibilities — allowing them to move on to the next most-important role and the next most-consequential hire.

Leave egotism out of it: you should always be able to find someone who can perform a given role within your company better than you can — and that's a good thing. (If you honestly can't, play that role instead and question whether there is someone better than you at being CEO...)

You've probably heard the CEO role compared to the conductor of an orchestra, but in a startup, you're more likely the conductor of musical chairs:

The founder has no choice but to start in whatever role is most necessary for the company to exist. He or she learns the role, understands its function and measures for success, and then fires themselves from that position and passes those responsibilities to someone else. The founder then trains the newly

appointed person up, provides context for how to best succeed in that role, and then moves on to the next role — and so on, and so forth.

When I was building Crashlytics with [Wayne Chang](#) in 2012, this was exactly my process.

For those who don't know, Crashlytics is a mobile crash reporting service that was acquired by Twitter (2013), and later acquired by Google (2017). From the day of launch, we scaled rapidly, growing the product to over 300 million iPhones in the first year. Today, Crashlytics operates on over 3 billion active devices.

At the very beginning, though, my job wasn't to direct a room-full of engineers or motivate a sales team. There weren't any. Crashlytics was just an idea — which meant my full-time priority was to code and prove-out the product.

Once we hired our first iOS engineer, I gave him context as to what we were working toward, introduced him to the codebase, and shifted my responsibilities to working on the backend. When we hired our first backend engineer, I shifted to frontend. When we hired a frontend engineer, I transitioned to fundraising, and helping Wayne with marketing and PR.

I moved in circles, like musical chairs, always making sure I was spending time where we were light and needed the most help.

This was how we slowly (but surely and confidently) built our team from the ground up. We intimately knew the type of people and skillsets we had to hire, because Wayne or I was playing each role ourself before hiring for them.

2. Hire People to Help you Hire.

If you're doing this well, you'll quickly reach the point where the company will outgrow your own ability to "chair hop."

Instead of filling one role at a time, you'll be filling three.

When we had a team of six engineers at Crashlytics, I realized I was spending nearly all of my time recruiting. I was putting up job postings, scheduling interviews, and performing a role that could have been done far more effectively by someone else. Someone better than me.

As my co-founder Wayne would put it, this meant **reassessing our "build order"** — choosing how we invested our capital in order to continue growing and what role we should hire for next.

So we hired a full-time recruiter.

Most startups withhold this hire for later in the game, but from our perspective it was a huge opportunity cost. The more time I spent sifting through candidate resumes, the less time I had to chart our course in the market and identify the next big challenge coming down the road.

And it worked — the recruiter we hired was so vastly better than me that we tripled our team in the next five months.

(Hat-tip to Aaron Levie for the original kick-in-the-pants to do this. In a future company, I would hire a full-time recruiter even sooner.)

3. Bring Top-Down Context, Not Top-Down Decisions

As the founder/CEO, you are in the single position that can see across roles, across skill-sets, across your market, and across your customer base. That is your unfair advantage. You aren't better than your team, but you certainly have more context than your team. How can you use this to empower them?

I like to picture my org chart upside-down. They don't report to me. I report to them. What do they need to succeed at their roles? Context to prioritize. Context to make decisions. Context to know when to push for more resources, or when to make-do.

When done correctly, this gives your team superpowers: they will be able to make the right decisions and prioritize what is most important without you having to hand-hold every conversation. And this gives you superpowers too: the time to focus on forward-looking strategy and risks instead of the day-to-day.

As the founder, you should be making 10% (or less) of all the key decisions in your company.

In fact, if you have to make a decision, it likely means you've already failed in some other way:

- You haven't filled that specific role yet.
- You've hired the wrong person for that role.
- You've hired someone at the wrong seniority for that role.
- You haven't shared enough context with them.
- You haven't clearly defined their areas of responsibility.
- You haven't empowered them to make the decision.

One of the greatest skills a founder/CEO can acquire is a talent for deference. I know plenty of founders who struggle to let go of direct responsibility, or fear letting other people drive parts of their business.

If you're unsure how self-sufficient your team is, ask yourself, how many times do you use the word "defer" in a day?

"I'm going to defer to Sarah on this decision."

"I'll defer to Tom on that."

Deference shows your team that you trust them to make their own decisions. And it shows yourself that you've put the right people in the right roles. The sooner you learn to empower your team to make decisions on their own, and the sooner you give them the context required to make the right decisions, the faster you will be able to fire yourself from day-to-day work.

All in all, so many founders forget that the ultimate goal is to make themselves completely unnecessary to the day-to-day operations of the company.

This sounds counter-intuitive, but trust me, there will always be someone better than you at every position in your company. And you should be excited to hire people who are smarter, more specialized than you at each individual skill set. They are the ones who will ultimately supply you with the time (and head space) to steer the company as a whole to market success.

The irony of course is, as a founder, you'll never be completely unnecessary to the business. In constantly trying to "fire yourself" from different roles, the company will continue to grow. As it grows, new responsibilities and challenges will arise, and you'll have to repeat the process of getting people up to speed all over again.

But that's the point.

The moment you stay married to any one role, you've stopped searching for your next replacement, and the company has begun to stand still.

You never want to be standing still.