The Founder Transfer Problem

Why growing companies lose context, focus and customer relevance when the founder's brand narrative does not transfer.

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If your company still makes more sense in your head than it does inside the organisation, you have a Founder Transfer Problem.

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01 | Opening thesis

You know the company is growing when people start explaining it without you in the room. At first, that feels like progress, because it means the business is no longer dependent on the founder for every sale, every hire, every decision or every important conversation. It means the organisation is becoming more mature, more distributed and more capable of moving without waiting for permission.

Then one day you hear someone explain the company and something feels slightly off.

Not completely wrong. Not bad enough to correct in public. Just smaller than it should be, flatter than the company you are actually building, or missing the logic that makes the whole thing make sense. A sales conversation carries the wrong emphasis, a senior hire uses language that sounds right but does not quite hold the original intent, or a team makes a decision that is reasonable on paper but somehow not what you would have chosen. The company is moving, but the meaning is starting to drift.

That is usually when founders realise that scaling does not only create an operational problem. It creates a transfer problem. The question is no longer whether the founder understands the company, because of course they do. The question is whether the company can still understand itself when the founder is no longer carrying the story personally.

This is the Founder Transfer Problem.

02 | The original advantage

The Founder Transfer Problem usually remains invisible because many CEOs assume the transfer is already happening.

The product is improving, the team is growing, marketing is communicating, sales is selling, operations are moving, investors are being updated, and the company appears to be functioning. From the CEO's point of view, the important work seems to be elsewhere: building the product, bringing in revenue, managing the organisation, keeping investors confident and making sure the company keeps moving forward.

But the deeper question is often left unanswered: is the company actually absorbing the founder's way of understanding the business, or is it simply executing around it?

This matters because marketing can express the story, but it cannot carry the founder's strategic logic for the whole organisation. A narrative can appear in a website, a deck, a campaign or a sales document and still fail to transfer into how people make decisions, prioritise customers, explain the company, hire talent, build product or protect what made the business relevant in the first place.

At twenty people working in the company, this problem is easy to miss because the company still makes sense without needing to explain itself too much. The founder is close to the customer, close to the product, close to the team and close to almost every important decision. People hear the same conversations, see the same problems and absorb the same judgement almost every day, so the company has context in the air.

That context is the original advantage.

It allows people to move quickly because they are not only aligned around tasks; they are aligned around meaning. They understand why certain customers matter more than others, why some opportunities are worth pursuing and others are a distraction, why the product is built in a certain way, why the company speaks with a certain tone, and why some decisions feel obviously right even before anyone has written down the criteria.

In small founder-led companies, much of the strategy travels informally through proximity, repetition, instinct, shared conversations and direct exposure to the founder's way of seeing the business. This is why early teams often feel unusually coherent. They may not have perfect processes, but they share a living sense of what the company is trying to become.

The danger is that this advantage can look more transferable than it really is. Because the company feels aligned, founders can mistake proximity for clarity, and because people make good decisions while they are close to the source, it can seem as if the strategic logic is already embedded in the organisation.

But often it is not embedded yet. It is simply nearby.

03 | What breaks as the company grows

The pattern usually does not appear as a dramatic breakdown. It appears as a series of small, reasonable decisions that slowly move the company away from the founder's original logic.

A company grows from twenty people to fifty, then from fifty to one hundred. New managers arrive, sales becomes more structured, product teams specialise, marketing starts producing more material, customer success becomes its own function, and the founder is no longer close to every conversation. On paper, this is exactly what should happen. The company is becoming more professional, more scalable and less dependent on one person.

But this is also the moment when the original advantage starts to weaken.

The leadership team begins making decisions without the full context that used to exist naturally around the founder. Sales starts adapting the story to different clients, sometimes in ways that help short-term conversion but weaken the deeper positioning. Marketing turns the company into a clearer message, but sometimes also a narrower one. Product teams focus on delivery, roadmap and features, but may lose sight of the customer tension that made the product matter in the first place. New hires learn what the company does, but not always why it does it that way.

None of this looks like failure. In fact, much of it looks like progress.

The company has better processes, better reporting, clearer functions and more people who can execute without waiting for the founder. But beneath that progress, the founder may start to notice a strange kind of distance. The company is doing more, but it does not always feel as if it is moving from the same centre. People are busy, competent and committed, yet the decisions, messages and behaviours no longer carry exactly the same logic.

This is where the Founder Transfer Problem becomes visible. The founder has successfully delegated tasks, but has not yet fully transferred the judgement behind those tasks. The organisation can move, but it does not always know how to interpret the business in the way the founder does.

And that is the critical difference. Growing is not only the ability to get more people doing more things. It is the ability to make sure that, as more people do more things, they are still operating from the same strategic understanding of what the company is, who it serves, why it matters and what should never be diluted along the way.

04 | The five sympthoms

The Founder Transfer Problem rarely announces itself directly. It does not usually appear as one clear moment where the company suddenly realises that the founder's logic has stopped transferring. More often, it appears through small symptoms that seem separate at first, but are actually connected by the same underlying issue.

The company is still working, the team is still executing and growth may still be happening, but the meaning behind the business is no longer travelling with the same clarity.

Individually, each of these symptoms may seem manageable. Together, they reveal the same problem: the company has grown beyond the founder's personal presence, but the founder's context, judgement and meaning have not yet become fully transferable.

04 | The five sympthoms (cont.)

The first symptom is leadership divergence. This happens when the leadership team can explain the company, but not always from the same logic. Each person may be intelligent, committed and capable, yet each one emphasises something slightly different: one talks about the product, another about the market, another about efficiency, another about growth, and another about the customer. None of them are necessarily wrong, but the company begins to sound like a collection of valid interpretations rather than one coherent strategic idea.

The second symptom is sales narrative inconsistency. As the sales function grows, the story often starts adapting too much depending on who is selling, who is buying or what needs to be closed that quarter. In the short term, this can look like flexibility. In the long term, it can weaken the company's positioning because the market starts hearing different versions of what the company is, why it matters and what kind of value it really creates.

The third symptom is shallow understanding among new hires. New people may understand the product, the process and the immediate objectives, but not always the deeper logic behind the company. They know what the business does, but not necessarily why it was built this way, what tension it is solving for customers, what standards should be protected or what kind of company it is trying to become.

The fourth symptom is external narrative compression. This happens when the story told outside the company becomes smaller than the company being built inside it. The website, pitch deck, sales material or public positioning may be clear, but too narrow. It may describe the product, the category or the functional benefit, while missing the larger ambition, intelligence or strategic depth of the business.

The fifth symptom is founder dependency. The founder still has to step in when the company needs to explain who it is, where it is going or why it matters. This can look like strong leadership, and sometimes it is, but it can also reveal that the organisation has not yet absorbed the founder's strategic logic deeply enough to carry it without them.

Individually, each of these symptoms may seem manageable. Together, they reveal the same problem: the company has grown beyond the founder's personal presence, but the founder's context, judgement and meaning have not yet become fully transferable.

05 | The hiden cost

The Founder Transfer Problem is expensive precisely because it does not look expensive at first.

The company continues to operate, customers continue to buy, teams continue to deliver and growth may continue for some time, which is why the problem can remain hidden beneath the surface of apparently healthy execution. But when the founder's context, judgement and customer intuition do not transfer clearly, the company slowly starts paying for the same gap in different places.

The first cost is loss of focus. As more people make decisions without the same strategic logic, the company begins to say yes to more things that look reasonable in isolation but do not necessarily strengthen the business as a whole. New opportunities, new features, new customer requests, new markets and new internal priorities compete for attention, and because the criteria behind the original focus are not fully shared, the organisation can become busy without becoming sharper.

The second cost is slower decision-making. Paradoxically, the company may have more people, more structure and more specialised teams, yet still depend on the founder to resolve the decisions that carry meaning. The founder becomes the person who has to interpret what matters, what fits, what should be protected and what should be rejected, not because the team is incapable, but because the deeper judgement has not been made transferable.

The third cost is diluted customer relevance. As the company grows, it becomes easier to optimise for the organisation instead of the customer. Processes become cleaner, reporting improves and teams become more efficient, but the company can start losing the closeness to customer problems that made it relevant in the first place. This is one of the most dangerous costs because it often arrives disguised as professionalisation.

The fourth cost is narrative inconsistency. Different parts of the company begin to tell different versions of the business, each one shaped by its own priorities. Sales may sell one version, marketing may publish another, product may build from another assumption, and leadership may describe the ambition in different terms. The market may not notice the internal fragmentation immediately, but over time it feels the lack of a single, unmistakable idea.

The fifth cost is founder dependency. The founder remains the person who makes the company make sense. This may feel normal in the early years, but as the company scales it becomes a constraint. If every important explanation, trade-off or strategic correction has to return to the founder, the company has not truly transferred the source of its coherence.

05 | The hiden cost (cont.)

The sixth cost appears later, but can be the most expensive of all: weak transferability. When a company reaches a moment of investment, succession or exit, the question is no longer only whether the current founder or CEO can explain the company with conviction. The question is whether the company's value can still be understood, trusted and carried if that person is no longer the one making it all make sense. If the strategic narrative, customer intuition and operating logic still live mainly in the founder's head, the business becomes harder to hand over, harder to evaluate and harder to believe in as an asset that can keep creating value beyond the founder's direct presence.

This is where the Founder Transfer Problem can start affecting valuation. If investors or acquirers sense that the company's coherence depends too heavily on one person, the perceived risk increases. The company may have strong revenue, strong product and strong momentum, but if the logic behind the business has not become embedded in the organisation, transferability becomes fragile. And when transferability is fragile, value becomes fragile too.

The hidden cost, then, is not only confusion. It is the gradual loss of strategic sharpness, organisational independence and transferable value. The company may become larger, more capable and more professional, but also less instinctively clear about what made it special, who it is really for, what it should protect and why the market should continue to care.

This is why the Founder Transfer Problem matters. Left unresolved, it does not simply affect communication. It affects focus, speed, customer relevance, leadership quality, market perception, investor confidence and ultimately the company's ability to scale without losing the logic that made it worth scaling in the first place.

06 | Why this is more than a brand problem

The Founder Transfer Problem often shows up through brand, narrative and communication, which is why it can easily be misunderstood.

The website does not quite explain the company. The sales deck feels too generic. The leadership team uses slightly different language. The pitch to investors depends too much on the founder. The company's external story feels smaller than the business being built internally. From the outside, these may look like communication issues, and the obvious response is to ask marketing, brand or comms to make the story clearer.

But the real issue is not that the company needs better words. It is that the strategic logic behind those words has not transferred clearly enough.

This is why the Founder Transfer Problem is a brand narrative and coherence problem, but not in the superficial sense of brand. It is not only about how the company sounds, looks or presents itself to the market. It is about whether the company has one shared understanding of what it is, who it serves, why it matters, what it should protect and how it should make decisions as it grows.

A company can have a polished narrative and still lack shared understanding. It can have a strong website and still make inconsistent decisions. It can have a beautiful deck and still depend on the founder to explain what really matters. It can have a refreshed brand identity and still operate from different interpretations of the business across leadership, sales, product, culture and customer experience.

Brand coherence, in this sense, is not a layer of communication added on top of the business.

It is the alignment between the company's strategic logic, internal behaviour and external narrative. When that coherence is missing, the company does not only communicate less clearly; it starts to interpret itself less consistently.

Marketing can help articulate the story, but it cannot carry the strategic logic of the business alone. If the founder's understanding remains implicit, if the criteria behind decisions are not shared, and if the organisation has not absorbed the deeper reason why the company exists, then brand remains a surface expression of a logic that still lives mainly in one person's head.

The real work, then, is not to separate brand from the transfer problem. It is to understand brand at the right level. Not as decoration, not as messaging, and not as a campaign, but as the system that helps the company make sense of itself and show up coherently in the market.

In that sense, the Founder Transfer Problem is solved by turning the founder's implicit logic into organisational clarity, and by making brand narrative and brand coherence part of how the company explains, sells, builds, decides and protects what made it worth scaling in the first place.

07 | The shift required

The shift required is from founder-carried clarity to organisation-embedded coherence.

In the early stage, clarity can live close to the founder because the company is still small enough for people to absorb it directly. The founder's judgement travels through conversations, decisions, customer stories, product choices, hiring discussions and the everyday correction of what fits and what does not. The organisation does not need to formalise everything because proximity is still doing much of the work.

But as the company grows, proximity stops being a reliable system.

The founder cannot be in every sales conversation, every leadership discussion, every product trade-off, every hiring decision or every moment where the company is being interpreted by someone else. If the strategic logic remains mainly intuitive, personal or informal, the organisation has no stable way to reproduce it at scale.

This is where the company needs a different kind of clarity. Not a slogan, not a messaging document and not a set of brand guidelines, but a transferable operating logic that helps people understand what the company is, who it is for, what it should protect, how it should make trade-offs and why it should matter.

The shift is from instinct to criteria.

Instead of relying on the founder to correct the company whenever something feels slightly off, the organisation needs shared principles that allow people to recognise what fits before the founder has to intervene. This does not mean removing the founder's influence; it means making the founder's strategic judgement usable by others.

The shift is also from communication to behaviour.

A narrative has not truly transferred because people can repeat it. It has transferred when leadership uses it to prioritise, sales uses it to qualify and explain value, product uses it to protect the customer logic, hiring uses it to identify the right people, and culture uses it to reinforce the standards that made the company relevant in the first place.

This is when brand stops being a layer of expression and becomes part of the company's operating system.

The goal is not to make the company less founder-led in spirit. The goal is to make the founder's logic less founder-dependent in practice, so the company can keep growing without losing the context, judgement and customer relevance that made it worth scaling.

08 | The founder transfer check

At some point, every scaling founder has to ask whether the company is still carrying the original logic of the business, or whether it is simply becoming better at operating around it. The difference is subtle, but important, because a company can look more mature, more structured and more professional while becoming less connected to the context that made it sharp in the first place.

A useful way to see the problem is to look at the moments where the founder is no longer present.

When the leadership team explains the company, do they describe the same strategic idea or do they each translate it through their own function? When sales tells the story, does it protect the real positioning or does it bend too easily towards what each prospect wants to hear? When new hires join, do they understand only the product and the process, or do they also understand the deeper reason why the company exists, who it is truly for and what should never be diluted?

The same question applies externally. Does the market see the company you are actually building, or only a simplified version of it? Does the narrative outside the business reflect the ambition, intelligence and customer relevance inside the business, or has it become smaller than the company itself?

And finally, there is the most uncomfortable question: are you still the person people depend on to make the company make sense?

If the answer is yes, the problem may not be that the team is weak, that marketing is unclear or that the company needs another communication exercise. It may simply mean that the founder's context, judgement and strategic logic have not yet been made transferable enough for the next stage of growth.

The question for the CEO, then, is not whether the company can operate without them. Many companies can. The harder question is whether the company can still interpret itself without them.

Founder transfer questions

1. Can your leadership team explain the company from the same strategic logic, without reducing it to their own function?
2. Does your sales team sell the same core story, or does the narrative change depending on who is selling?
3. Do new hires understand why the company matters, or only what the company does?
4. Are product, sales, marketing and culture making decisions from the same underlying criteria?
5. Does your external narrative reflect the company you are actually building, or a smaller version of it?
6. Are you still the person people rely on to explain what fits, what matters and what should be protected?
7. If the company doubled in size over the next two years, what would be most at risk of being diluted?

09 | Colsing invitation

The Founder Transfer Problem does not show up in the same place for every company.

For some founders, it appears in sales, when the story starts changing depending on who is selling. For others, it appears in leadership, when different functions begin making reasonable decisions from slightly different assumptions. In some companies, it appears through hiring, when new people understand the product but not the deeper logic of the business. In others, it appears externally, when the market sees a smaller, simpler version of the company than the one being built inside.

But the issue becomes even more important when the company has to prove that its value is transferable.

At some point, especially around investment, succession or exit, the question is no longer only whether the founder can explain the company. The question is whether the company can still make sense without the founder personally carrying the narrative. If the strategic logic, customer intuition and meaning of the business still live mainly in the founder's head, transferability becomes fragile. And when transferability is fragile, value becomes fragile too.

That is why this problem matters beyond communication, culture or positioning. It affects how confidently the company can scale, how easily leadership can change, how clearly investors can understand the business, and how much of the company's value can survive beyond the founder's direct presence.

The point is not whether every company experiences this problem in the same way. They do not. The point is whether the founder's context, judgement and customer intuition are still transferring clearly enough for the company's next stage of growth.

That is the question I am exploring with founders, CEOs and investors who have already moved beyond the early stage of growth.

If this feels familiar, I would be interested in hearing where the transfer problem shows up most clearly in your company: in leadership, sales, hiring, product, culture, customer proximity, market narrative, investor confidence, succession or somewhere else.

Because the real question is not whether the company can keep growing, it is whether its value remains transferable when the founder is no longer there to make the business understandable, believable and strategically coherent.