

Scaling by “delegation” isn’t good enough



credit¹

Founding a company is a selfish act. It will consume every waking moment for the next 1-10 years. It’s an act of defiance and irreverence towards competitors and the status quo. This matches the life of a 20-something—fueled by the energy of youth, too young to be jaded, without financial or social dependents. Not all selfish acts are bad ones!

Young founders may fancy themselves wizards of coding,² design,³ and salesmanship;⁴ I did! Maybe they’re even right, or right enough.⁵

But those skills don’t help them build a team of 100 engineers that balance quality with speed, or assemble and manage an international sales team guided by principles other than overwhelming exuberance, or develop a consistent global brand with a voice and adherents, or manage cash flows once the P&L becomes abbreviated “in millions.”

Introspective young founders appreciate this, and often the stated solution is “delegation,” as defined by:

1. First I’ll do it myself.
2. Then I’ll understand it.
3. Then I’ll have the experience to hire and instruct a new person to do it the right way (i.e. my way)

This is how I did it when I was young and naïve, and I see the pattern repeated all the time.

And it’s wrong.

The trouble with this form of delegation is **it results in a team that is not materially better than the founder**, at anything. Which is incredibly limiting for the company, and sadly quite common.

It’s a variant of the rule that if you think a certain position at the company isn’t useful, it’s because you’ve never worked with greatness⁶ at that position. When you’re looking for someone who knows what you know, and works like you work, you’re not finding greatness, you’re finding a substitute for your already-not-world-class performance, and of course you’ll get exactly that.

Whereas, as the job of the founder—or any manager—is the opposite: **To hire people who are better than you at every position**, because only then is your organization increasing its strength and abilities.

If you hire and then micromanage,⁷ or constantly have to “fix” what others are doing, you’re a bad manager. Because if the person is in fact not capable, then you hired the wrong person. Or if the person is capable, then you’re getting in their way and wasting your time. If the person isn’t better than you at the position, you’re not making the organization better. If the person is better than you, then your micromanagement is destroying that improvement while also destroying their morale and your schedule.

In every case, it’s bad management, and it’s your fault.

“It doesn’t make sense to hire smart people and then tell them what to do.

We hire smart people so they can tell us what to do.”
—Steve Jobs

This mistake compounds when you’re building a larger organization, because then the goal stretches beyond individual excellence: Your job is to build *teams which themselves grow and create greatness*. This is a meta or recursive problem: Not the founder attracting, identifying, and retaining greatness, but the founder building teams who themselves are doing that. This is the best definition of “team-building.”

Delegation isn’t team-building, and thus it doesn’t lead to scale, nor to greatness.

Rather, hiring “up” creates greatness, and the space for scale.

Scaling your business requires that you **convert your initial selfishness into the empowerment of others**. “Delegation” means you still own it but someone else does the work. “Team-building” means the team is trusted to own it, has obligations for that, can figure out and execute all the details, and is responsible not just for meeting initial expectations, but increasing their expectations of themselves.

You’re still in charge, but the team is in command.⁷

This is where you achieve true scale in a company. Delegation is where you assign away lesser jobs so you can be even more heroic, because it’s still about you. But you’re still the bottleneck even if you’ve made that neck a little wider. Team-building means no bottleneck because the team can be as wide as needed. In fact the best teams measure their own necks and decide how and when to widen further.

This is where you derisk the company by moving from brittle to resilient. Through delegation alone, if one person gets sick, a deadline is missed. Or if someone leaves the company, a strategy isn’t executed. With team-building, you have group knowledge. Someone being sick or leaving the company gets baked into the plan.

The moment where you truly understand and embrace this concept is when you can turn the gun on yourself and realize that no one is exempt from this rule. It’s relatively easy for a technical founder to agree that she isn’t the best person to build a global sales organization, but is she ready to agree that *even where she is excellent*, it’s still her job to find people who are even more excellent, not just at individual tasks but at building entire teams?

That’s what I did at WP Engine, multiple times, including no longer being the CEO. Here’s exactly how⁸ I figured out why that was the correct decision.

But doesn’t this mean that ultimately **leaders are managing a set of people, all of whom are better-qualified than that leader to do those jobs**? And isn’t that difficult to manage, after all how do you argue with those people, and how will you earn the respect and confidence of those people? Yes, that is what it means, and yes that is difficult. And it’s your job, because anything less is by definition holding the company back.

If you can’t handle that, don’t be a manager, don’t be a leader, and most of all, don’t be the CEO. The company—and all its employees—deserve a real leader.

So convert the selfishness and egocentrism of starting a company, needed initially to get the engine turning over, into an egoless, outward facing, empowering, team-growing organization, where your goal is for you to never be the most knowledgeable and experienced person in the room, because you've surrounded yourself with greatness, who each do the same.

source: book

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