Evolution of the Founder: Shifts in Delegation

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Abstract

Start-up founders routinely exercise decision-making authority as they establish and develop their ventures. However, as start-ups grow, it becomes challenging for their founders to make all decisions on behalf of their organizations. To capitalize on new opportunities, founders must delegate to colleagues outside of their core team to free up their physical and cognitive resources. Extant research on delegation focuses on comparatively static organizational settings, failing to capture the volatile processes that are characteristic of start-ups. Given the unpredictable nature of start-ups, founders must be highly flexible to drive the success of their ventures. Through a qualitative, inductive study of 37 start-up founders, I offer a theoretical model of delegation in start-ups depicting the psychological shifts founders undergo when surpassing developmental milestones. My findings suggest that these psychological shifts occur in three broadly defined phases: (1) attachment, (2) uncoupling, and (3) opportunity. When interviewed, founders generally corroborated experiences where they made choices that led to increased growth or stagnation for their organizations. In developing a process model for rapidly evolving environments, I further elucidate the processes of leadership and delegation.

Introduction

Start-ups have profoundly influenced modern society, becoming a catalyst for rapid world economic growth (Jurgens, 2022). Consequently, these organizations, usually led by a team of founders (Klotz et al., 2014; Lechler, 2001; West, 2007), are increasingly becoming of interest to scholars. For this study, I use Knight et al.'s (2020) multidimensional conceptualization of start-up teams: "a group of two or more people who work together interdependently to discover, evaluate, and exploit opportunities…who collectively have some ownership of equity, some autonomy of decision-making, and some entitativity" (255).

In 2021, start-ups shattered global funding records with a total of over $620 billion; funding for early-stage start-ups alone increased from $100 billion in 2020 to $201 billion in 2021 (Chapman, 2022; Teare, 2022).

Within the last decade, we've seen the number of unicorn start-ups[1] go from 39 to over 900, currently valued at over $3.5 trillion collectively (Rubio, 2023). These start-up ventures have dramatically shaped our lives, changing how we shop, travel, and communicate (McDonald & Gao, 2019). Despite their impact, the road to success for start-ups is anything but easy. Amidst the age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, a period defined by rapidly improving technology and the advancement of industries, idleness is not an option (Schwab, 2016). For young firms, establishing and maintaining a competitive position in an industry hinges on their ability to leverage their limited resources, capabilities, and strategic assets (Thornhill & Amit, 2003). Start-ups must innovate or risk failure, and much of this burden lies with their founders.

Over the past several decades, the marketplace has become increasingly turbulent, pushing organizations to swiftly make decisions to remain competitive (Luciano et al, 2020; Perlow et al., 2002). Thus, successful start-up founders often find it necessary to make immense personal sacrifices to achieve their vision. Disrupting industry incumbents is an arduous task; long hours, burnout, and detrimental health outcomes often accompany the start-up experience, with little assurance of success (Khaire, 2010; Shepherd et al., 2010). In response, modern founders often choose to undertake this journey with a core team (Klotz et al., 2014; Lechler, 2001; West, 2007). This team of founders will have a broader pool of resources from which it can draw (Shane & Stuart, 2022), but perhaps more importantly, these groups leverage collaboration to shape the future of their organizations (Stewart, 2006). Often, the impact of the decisions these founders make will linger long after they depart from their ventures (De Cuyper et al., 2020).

Founders face substantial cognitive and physical limitations as they develop and scale their start-ups (De Pater et al., 2010). To remedy this, founders rely on their co-founders to support them in their entrepreneurial endeavors and improve venture outcomes (Beckman & Burton, 2008; Ferguson et al., 2016). These teams will often extend well beyond the initial group of founders and are a crucial component for the longevity of the start-up. Thus, founders, a group renowned for their narcissistic tendencies and overconfidence (Navis & Volkan Ozbeck, 2016), learn to delegate to others to grow their ventures and meet key milestones.

Despite delegation's importance in start-up enterprises, scholarship on delegation within rapidly changing, fast-paced business environments remains limited; most delegation research focuses on established corporations (e.g., Bunderson, 2003; Chen & Aryee, 2007; Schriesheim et al., 1998). Noting this discrepancy, some scholars have examined leadership and decision-making processes in highly volatile, unstable work environments, such as trauma care and inpatient units (e.g., Klein et al., 2006; Mayo, 2022). While not a perfect example, these settings do

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[1] Unicorn is a term coined by Lee (2013) used to represent a start-up venture with a $1 billion valuation.

provide extreme situations lending insight into the challenges facing start-ups such as interdependencies among members, flexible leadership, and withdrawal of roles due to challenging demands (Klein et al., 2006). However, without conceptual clarity on how start-up founders develop and expand their teams during various stages of growth, we lack a clear understanding of how founders establish the foundation their ventures are built upon. This research seeks to understand how founder delegation can be either an impediment to organizational progress or a pathway for growth and improved organizational performance.

Meet the Founders

Given the limited theory on delegation within start-up ventures, I took an inductive, grounded theory approach to collect and analyze data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Of the 356 start-up founders who were contacted, 37 agreed to participate in a one-on-one interview. Broadly defined, industries represented in the sample include software development, application-based technology, and network security (21 companies); manufacturing and transportation (8); food and beverage (2); biotechnology research and healthcare (3); agriculture (1); consumer electronics (1); and retail (1). Start-ups varied significantly in age, financing sources, and amount of funding. For example, participating start-ups ranged in size from the newly created, bootstrapped venture with $10,000-$50,000 in funding to well-established unicorns with thousands of employees (see Figure 1). Nonetheless, all ventures met Knight et al.'s (2020) criteria for start-up teams. Using a protocol adapted from Petriglieri & Peshkam (2022) and Caza et al. (2018), interviews involved broad questions about how founders identify those to whom they should delegate and how the way they delegate this authority has shifted over the course of their focal ventures. As data collection progressed, first-order codes were grouped into six distinct subphases of delegation (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Founder demographic and start-up background

Identifier	Gender	Founder Age (years)	Focal Venture Age	General Industry	# of employees	Venture Backed	Total Funding Raised
FND01	Male	51-60	6-10 years	Tech	1-50	Yes	Acquired
FND02	Male	51-60	11+ years	Manufacturing	1-50	No	$1-10M
FND03	Male	21-30	1-5 years	Tech	1-50	Yes	$1-10M
FND04	Male	31-40	1-5 years	Consumer electronics	1-50	No	<$1M
FND05	Male	61+	11+ years	Tech	1-50	No	Undisclosed
FND06	Male	41-50	1-5 years	Healthcare	51-100	Yes	$11-20M
FND07	Male	21-30	1-5 years	Tech	1-50	No	Acquired
FND08	Male	61+	1-5 years	Tech	1-50	Yes	Acquired
FND09	Male	41-50	1-5 years	Manufacturing	1-50	No	<$1M
FND10	Male	31-40	11+ years	Manufacturing	1-50	Yes	<$1M
FND11	Female	31-40	1-5 years	Tech	51-100	Yes	$11-20M
FND12	Male	41-50	6-10 years	Tech	101+	Yes	$21-30M
FND13	Female	41-50	11+ years	Retail	101+	Yes	$1-10M
FND14	Male	31-40	1-5 years	Manufacturing	1-50	Yes	$31-40M
FND15	Male	41-50	6-10 years	Manufacturing	51-100	Yes	>$50M
FND16	Male	61+	6-10 years	Manufacturing	1-50	No	Undisclosed
FND17	Male	21-30	1-5 years	Tech	1-50	No	<$1M
FND18	Male	31-40	6-10 years	Tech	1-50	Yes	$11-20M
FND19	Female	31-40	6-10 years	Tech	1-50	Yes	$1-10M
FND20	Female	31-40	1-5 years	Tech	1-50	Yes	<$1M
FND21	Male	41-50	1-5 years	Tech	1-50	No	Undisclosed
FND22	Male	-	1-5 years	Manufacturing	1-50	Yes	$1-10M
FND23	Male	51-60	11+ years	Tech	101+	Yes	>$50M
FND24	Male	31-40	6-10 years	Tech	101+	Yes	>$50M
FND25	Male	21-30	1-5 years	Tech	1-50	No	Undisclosed
FND26	Male	21-30	1-5 years	Tech	1-50	Yes	$1-10M
FND27	Male	41-50	6-10 years	Agriculture	1-50	No	Undisclosed
FND28	Male	41-50	1-5 years	Food and beverage	1-50	Yes	Acquired
FND29	Female	31-40	11+ years	Manufacturing	1-50	Yes	<$1M
FND30	Male	41-50	11+ years	Tech	101+	Yes	Acquired
FND31	Male	31-40	6-10 years	Healthcare	101+	Yes	>$50M
FND32	Male	51-60	1-5 years	Tech	1-50	Yes	$1-10M
FND33	Male	21-30	1-5 years	Food and beverage	1-50	Yes	Undisclosed
FND34	Male	21-30	6-10 years	Tech	51-100	Yes	$11-20M
FND35	Male	31-40	6-10 years	Tech	1-50	No	Undisclosed
FND36	Male	31-40	11+ years	Tech	101+	Yes	>$50M
FND37	Male	41-50	6-10 years	Healthcare	51-100	Yes	$31-40M

FIGURE 1.

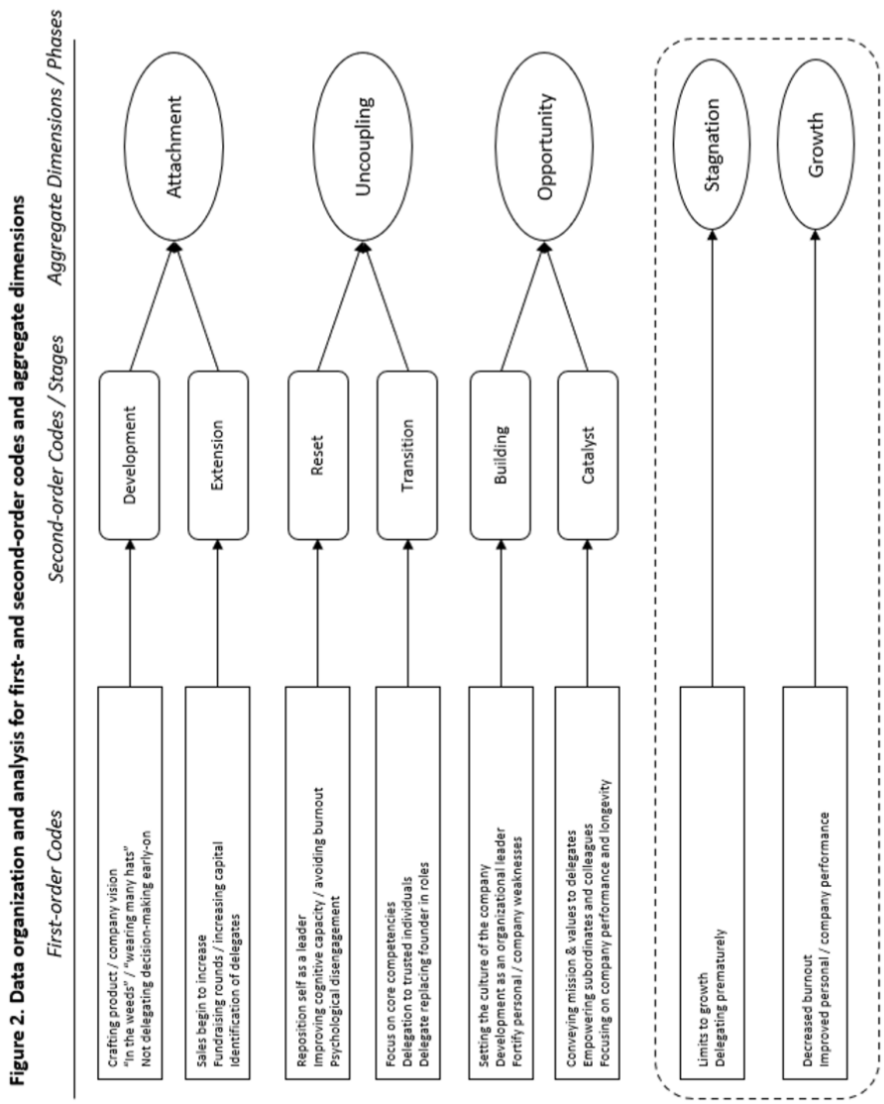

FIGURE 2.

Evolution of the Founder

While start-up founders differ greatly in their leadership and management tactics, there exist high-level commonalities in how they describe the importance of delegation within their ventures, particularly regarding organizational growth and development. Founders identified that the ability to context switch and evolve during all stages of growth was an essential characteristic of successful founders. An exemplar of this mentality, FND34[2] stated:

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[2] *To protect the identities of founders who participated in this study I have incorporated the deidentification method employed by Rouse (2016). Each founder will be referred to by a unique numerical identifier starting with FND (i.e., founder). All company names have been redacted.*

> What made [founders] go from zero to one is not necessarily what will let them go from one to ten and especially not when they have to go from ten to one hundred. A totally different skill set is required.

Several late-stage founders alluded to a similar phenomenon, with FND08 claiming that “super early-stage founding is one thing. Then the second thing is scaling. And the third is hyper-growth. And most people who do [stage] one can do [stage] two. But most people who do one and two well, aren't good at [stage] three….” These findings illustrated that there are substantial psychological shifts that founders need to undergo to successfully delegate and develop their ventures. Founders indicated they needed to evolve alongside their organizations or risk being left behind by competitors. The responses provided by founders led to the identification of three broad phases of delegation, each encompassing dual subphases: (1) attachment, (2) uncoupling, and (3) opportunity. The ability of start-up founders to pivot in each of these three phases dictated the degree of growth their start-up experienced (see Figure 3).

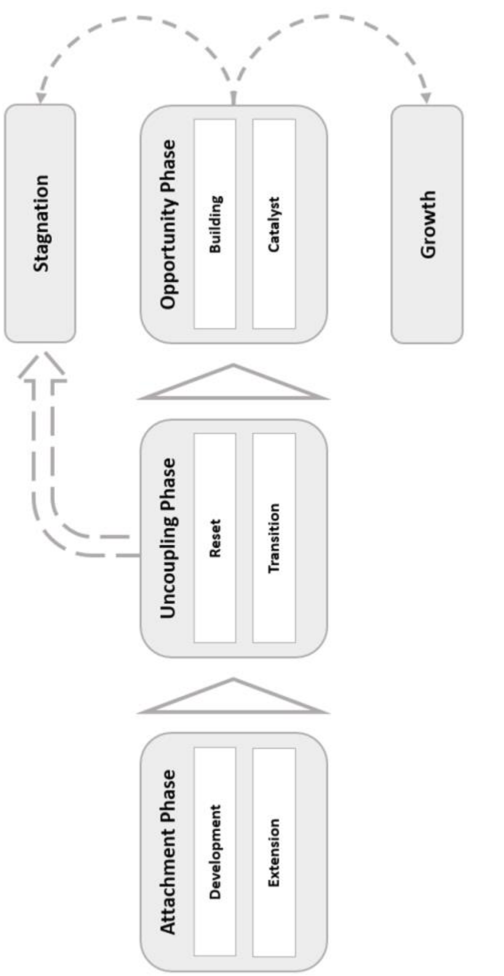

Figure 3. Phase model of start-up founder delegation

FIGURE 3.

Phase 1: Attachment

Early on, founders carefully construct a vision for their start-up. These founders will be burdened with running most day-to-day functions of their organizations themselves, often delegating responsibilities amongst a small team of co-founders with a pre-established sense of trust. As a result, founders generally develop a psychological attachment to their start-ups, making it difficult for them to delegate to new employees or colleagues. Wasserman (2012) notes that some founders even begin to think of their start-up as their child; this depiction was corroborated by several founders dubbing this phenomenon, "baby syndrome" (FND01) or "founders' disease" (FND08). While this attachment has the potential to slow growth in the subsequent uncoupling phase, several founders note that the underpinnings of the attachment phase are an essential step in the start-up experience. The dual subphases of attachment are (1) development, in which the founder—usually alongside a team of co-founders—innovates and develops a product alongside a company vision; and (2) extension, in which sales and public interest increase rapidly and founders generally begin fundraising heavily and identifying potential delegates to help manage growth.

The development subphase is the earliest stage of start-up evolution with delegation largely occurring within the founding team and decision-making assigned based on functional expertise. Menial tasks (e.g., boxing products, sending emails, etc.) and mundane decision-making (e.g., organizing files, travel arrangements, etc.) are still largely the responsibility of founders. While founders indicated they have domains of expertise when beginning a start-up, they often maintain control over mundane decisions because they lack the resources required to offload these responsibilities. Passion, adaptability, and long hours are prominent features of the founder in the development subphase of the start-up process:

> In the first three to five years of a startup, you are wearing a lot of different hats. You are down in the mud and heavily involved with day-to-day operations. You're the most important business development engine for your company. (FND06)

Similarly, in the development phase, founders are setting a "North Star" (FND23) to align their organization before they begin to bring on additional teammates. The concept of a North Star was used by several founders as an analogy for the underlying purpose of their start-up ventures. For founders, being able to clearly articulate this North Star to prospective employees, customers, and investors was a prerequisite to shifting to the extension subphase.

During the extension subphase, founders seek out pathways to grow their organizations (e.g., funding) and/or experience an influx of sales and consumer interest. As a result, founders often describe the toll this stage exacts on their lives outside of work. For example, FND21 stated, "I'm doing demos from 8:00am to 9:00pm at night. I'm not seeing my wife. I'm not seeing my kids. This sucks, right?" In conjunction with this immense personal impact, founders noted that they begin to recognize they are becoming the bottleneck within their venture. While increased revenue is a virtuous byproduct of a sales influx, founders often need to turn to outside sources of funding, such as venture capital, to bring on new employees and maintain growth trajectories. Founders can occasionally get by via bootstrapping, capital from angel investors, and pre-seed funding, but several founders note that more substantial funding via Seed, Series A, or subsequent rounds is necessary to bring on high-quality talent and manage rapid growth (FND20 and FND31). However, because of the substantial time and energy founders have already dedicated to their ventures, they have often formed a psychological attachment to their start-up which can make delegation outside of their core team challenging.

Phase 2: Uncoupling

When founders contemplate bringing on new members to their foundational ventures, they change their relationship with their start-up. This is the first phase that can lead to significant stagnation for the enterprise. Although many founders describe it as crucial to be able to "wear multiple hats" early on and set the vision for the enterprise, in the uncoupling phase founders begin to see themselves as "team builders" within their organizations (FND14). This phase is divided into two subphases: (1) reset, in which founders psychologically disengage from their venture and reconceptualize their role to capitalize on growth opportunities; and (2) transition, in which a founder transitions from a jack-of-all-trades to a team-builder, ceding control to trusted individuals and capitalizing on their personal core competencies.

During the reset stage, founders reconceptualize their role as a founder within their start-up. With the burden of the elevated responsibility arising during the extension stage, many founders begin to look for avenues to improve venture operations. They realize their inability to detach from their ventures and areas of expertise prevents the organization from achieving its full potential. FND30 notes this mental reset:

> A lot of folks think you have to be this lopsided genius in technology or something, and it's so far from the truth. I think what you need to have are balanced teams. When you don't have enough resources to have a team then you have to be a balanced person.

Those who find themselves still heavily involved in day-to-day decision-making processes often point to their inability to mentally reset and trust others as their primary impediment to growth. In the attachment phase, being a generalist is often required due to a lack of vital resources. This allows founders to generate a concrete vision for the company and develop an intricate understanding of their start-up and the industry in which it operates. Yet, founders often become attached to their organizations due to the significant amount of time and resources they have invested. In the reset phase, they come to terms with their inability to manage all aspects of their organization. This mental reset allows founders to effectively transition to being strong leaders and team-builders within their start-ups.

Having psychologically disengaged from their ventures, founders begin to cede substantial decision-making authority to their newly found colleagues. Although some founders continue to capitalize upon their individual core competencies and expertise, almost all founders in this stage begin to delegate decision-making authority to colleagues whom they have identified as sufficiently passionate and competent. Throughout all interviews, founders highlighted that potential delegates must first demonstrate that they are trustworthy to gain more decision-making authority. Several founders indicated that they would give new employees small tasks or tests to determine an individual's capabilities, competence, and passion. The exact duration of this trial period varied across founders, ranging from several weeks to several years. However, founders are often quick to delegate to individuals who complement their personal weaknesses, have a specific or relevant domain of expertise (generally one not possessed by the founding team), and/or indicate that they would be formidable leaders. Founders not only delegate "down" and "across" to their co-founders and subordinates; those leading companies with venture funding often indicated that they would delegate "up" to their board of advisors. The board of advisors usually has a vested interest, oftentimes financial, in seeing the start-up succeed. Founders will leverage their investors' experience, resources, and network, especially if they specialize in a relevant industry. By delegating up, founders have a pool of mentors to draw upon. For example, FND08 asserted that "[venture capitalists] have so much useful scar tissue in terms of scaling businesses and can provide invaluable coaching advice. You can reach out to them in the middle of the night, and you don't have to wait."

Founders often expressed the belief that it is their duty to "continually fire themselves from roles" (FND33). Whereas initially founders were highly involved in the venture's day-to-day operations, now they predominately functioned as "team-builders" rather than a jack-of-all trades or functional experts (FND22 and FND27). Employees who supplant founders are given significant autonomy within their areas of functional expertise. Founders indicated that a strong team ensures the start-up can remain competitive with rivals and maintain a culture of innovation. As a byproduct of this transition, the number of meetings with delegates often increases and several founders note that they felt substantial "mental fatigue" during their transition from a generalist to a team-builder and more formal manager (FND04).

Phase 3: Opportunity

During the opportunity phase, founders describe how they are now responsible for conveying the vision of the start-up to others, reinforcing the culture of the organization, and empowering employees to make decisions. Founders in this phase assert that they take a birds-eye view of the organization, often lacking visibility into many of the activities they formerly owned in the attachment phase of development. Therefore, founders shift to (1) building, in which they take an active role in setting the culture of the start-up, continue to develop as an organizational leader, and fortify the start-up's strengths; and (2) catalyst, where they take on an active role in conveying the organization's North Star to employees thereby ensuring employees can carry forth the core values of the organization.

During the building stage, founders describe one of their core responsibilities as leading their venture and providing employees with the autonomy necessary for them to succeed. Founders seek to empower those around them, identifying individuals who are exceptionally passionate or competent and giving them the necessary resources for success. Several founders expressed the idea that a start-up is not necessarily the place where employees have the space to improve upon their weaknesses, rather it is a space for them to capitalize on their strengths and build core competencies for the enterprise (FND11). Employees who deliver results become invaluable to the start-up and the ability to instill this drive in others is crucial for ensuring long-term success:

> If they [employees] succeed at something, elevate it, promote it, and put them on a pedestal and show the whole organization something incredible that they did. And you have to keep pushing this mentality all the way through the entire organization. (FND36)

In the catalyst subphase, founders indicated that employees need to internalize the organization's fundamental values so the organization's underlying mission might be sustained as the start-up becomes more hierarchical and expands. At this stage, founders have established a core group of individuals, outside of the original founding team, to whom they can delegate. However, founders emphasized three broad areas within their start-ups in which they were unlikely to delegate to others: strategic vision (i.e., defining the North Star of the venture), employee empowerment (i.e., giving employees autonomy to make decisions), and organizational performance (i.e., ensuring the venture remains profitable). Early on during the attachment phase of development, the founders shaped the vision of the organization. In the catalyst subphase, founders serve as a cultural catalyst to convey and instill a commitment to this vision in their employees. If successful, the North Star that founders established in the attachment phase will serve as the "DNA of the company", so when employees delegate to others they will index to the core values of the organization (FND23).

Outcomes: Stagnation v. Growth

Founders who progress through the stages laid out in this framework indicate that they have experienced substantial growth as a result. Founders' passion and commitment to their ventures often lead to psychological attachment. Although this attachment proves crucial for start-up success in the early days of start-up development, uncoupling allows founders to capitalize on growth opportunities. The founder who has uncoupled and empowered employees will often have teams of diligent employees who carry on the original vision of the organization years after its founding. From an individual standpoint, founders describe delegation as a prerequisite to being more productive, having improved personal relationships, and decreasing levels of burnout. Although the scope of this study was not to examine company performance or employee satisfaction, extant literature demonstrates that employee autonomy can improve organizational performance (Gambardella et al., 2020).

However, not all founders are able to successfully navigate all stages of this framework. Several founders detailed how delegating too early served as an impediment to growth (FND16). They often experienced pushback from their teams or delegated to individuals who did irreparable damage to their brand's image. In addition, FND02 notes that is difficult to cede responsibility because of the attachment that has formed since the beginning of the venture:

> The key part of the value chain analysis was like, at the very bottom, we had to write down who's responsible for that aspect of the value chain. And my name was on all of them (FND02)

This founder is not alone; several other founders expressed that it is often difficult to let go of decision-making authority because founders bear substantial risk compared to employees. One of the defining features of a founder is they are holders of equity within their focal ventures (Knight et al., 2020). In addition, they must act on limited information when deciding to whom they should delegate. Delegating can also be particularly troublesome for founders who are experts in their craft, holding others to the same standard they hold themselves. As FND18 notes, "I'm a below-average delegator, right? And I said the reasons why are that I'm sort of like a perfectionist and have strong opinions about how things should be done." Multiple founders indicated that employees often do not have the same level of expertise or commitment as the founders; thus, their quality of work and/or timeliness might be comparatively lacking. However, by overcoming this "perfectionist" mindset, founders have shown they can build and train a talented team that can progress more as a united whole, rather than solely the labor of a few individuals. For founders who are considering a succession plan, they expressed confidence in their team's ability to progress towards the start-up's ultimate purpose, or North Star, that the start-up was meant to achieve.

Founders who evolved alongside their organizations detailed how they were able to readily accommodate growth opportunities and stave off stagnation. From the onset, the onus is on the firm's founder to determine whether the venture will succeed or fail. This drive to succeed becomes even more burdensome when founders experience an influx in sales or take on outside investors. Satisfying these outside stakeholders adds an additional incentive to succeed. Despite this responsibility, there is a limit to how many high-quality decisions founders can make (Dobrajska et al., 2015). To navigate this process and build a high-performing team, founders indicated that their personal evolution is intertwined with that of their start-up. As their start-ups meet key milestones, founders needed to shift their leadership tactics to propel their start-ups forward. Founders often accredited their start-up's growth to their ability to evolve alongside their venture; the converse was true for those who felt their venture's growth had stagnated (See Figure 4 for additional quotes on each subphase).

Second-Order Quotations for Founder Delegation

Stage	Founder Quotes
Development	**FND28**: "The biggest issue that we had, and the reason why we were not able to delegate, is because the business was on fire from almost minute one. And we just did not have the time to conduct interviews, to get people to step in and take on responsibility. And so, I wore a million different hats." **FND33:** "My point is I probably delegated too much at the beginning…ultimately, that catches up to you. And you see the cracks in the system that have formed over time." **FND20:** "I'm saying this out loud to kind of tell it to myself, too. I think [the inability to delegate] comes from the fact that I can't articulate the vision which enables people to make decisions about how to get there. I'm scared to let go of the things I can control."

Extension	**FND35:** " I just am like a little kid wearing daddy’s shoes and trying to make this work well enough until I can bring in someone who really knows how.” **FND11:** “It takes a lot of moving parts to make the engine run. So, if they all are not at the same momentum, then you have a problem. And if you don't start delegating, [decision-making] is going to be stuck with one or two individuals, then you slow down the entire process.” **FND20:** "Angel rounds, friends and family rounds, and even pre-seed rounds, they're not enough to get you really a team. In my experience, when I've seen the team come on, it's like a Seed or Series, A, you need around 5 to 10 million [dollars] to get yourself 10 to 15 solid people.”
Reset	**FND01**: “You must create a good company and you must be able to build the foundation for all the different parts. Now, at some point in time, you send your baby [i.e., company] to school, to preschool, to camp, and so on. So maybe it's not a terrible analogy, as time goes by, you need to be able to let go otherwise, the baby grows up to be weird, or a killer.” **FND26:** "It's been a great sort of mental release. Holding on to everything is just 10 more things to do. And you know, as I'm sure you talked to other founders, there’s always more to do, always more checklists”
Transition	**FND36:** “If you want to go somewhere fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together. I knew from the beginning, we had to have a strong team because we were trying to do several insurmountable, seemingly impossible, tasks at a time and they can't be done alone; they have to be delegated.” **FND28: “**For the first six or seven months, I wouldn't let them touch the product. I just wanted to make sure that they really understood how to speak the [product] language fluently. So eventually I got them up to speed. And I gave them a little leeway, not much, a little leeway to start making some sales calls…” **FND04:** “And I find myself sometimes in the afternoon, I'll be in a conversation with someone and just realize my brain is like melting and that I'm incapable of making any impact on the conversation.”

Building	**FND26:** "Let's say I have 100 units of time, and I'm spending all of that in the business. Suddenly, I'm taking 60-70 out and doing something else for a couple of months and then coming back right. So, while I was gone, I think it's very crucial that the machine of the company continues running and that's when I know we achieved a good point." **FND22: "**I have a philosophy around leadership and management: making sure and validating that they have the capability to look at a situation understand the problem, diagnose the problem, create a strategy to solve the problem, and implement that solution without micromanaging those people" **FND05:** "I have a key set of leaders on this team that I can easily rely on both to say, keep me in check and to make sure that I'm seeing things clearly seeing things widely. And, but also to take significant leadership roles in those things. So I would say that the delight for me is that there's never been a moment where I felt very alone here."
Catalyst	**FND13:** "Cultural issues, are something that stays with the founders. If a new thing happens in society, we are involved in that decision-making process and what Company Y's response should be to that situation." **FND18:** "I don't think that it's a good idea for founders to delegate setting the mission or the vision for the company. We're not going to bring in somebody to tell us how to build our business because it would not be a good idea to decentralize that decision-making because there are lots of successful business models out there, but we have to do it our way." **FND30:** "It was much more about how the team is feeling about this and where, from my unique vantage point, seeing across all this and thinking about that integrative sort of outcomes of what we're trying to do together"

FIGURE 4.

Conclusion

Start-ups are becoming an increasingly dominant force in society, experiencing a resurgence in popularity in 2020 (Casselman, 2021), and are responsible for substantial world economic growth (Jurgens, 2022). Behind each start-up lies a founder with a vision. However, they seldom achieve their goals alone (Klotz et al., 2014; Lechler, 2001; West, 2007) and instead delegate to others to free up their physical and cognitive resources (Dobrajska et al., 2015). Across 37 interviews, nearly all start-up founders detailed how pivoting their mindset as their ventures grew increased innovation, personal fulfillment, and financial success. Those who struggled to evolve alongside their organizations indicated their inability to delegate was an impediment to their venture's growth. This model may help explain why some founders are more successful at keeping pace with rapid growth and leaving a lasting imprint on the culture of their start-up enterprises. Aside from this study's contributions to scholarship on delegation, the findings from this research can serve as a guide to current and aspiring start-up founders and emerging business leaders. Burnout costs the global economy over $300 billion annually (Bruce, 2019). Evidence suggests that start-up founders—with their extreme passion and limited safety nets—often experience elevated levels of burnout compared to other occupations (Mol et al., 2018). Despite this trend, these 37 start-up founders illuminated how they were able to evolve alongside their ventures and create strong teams, allowing them to continue radically redefining our world.

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