

Founderitis

There is a Cure

The diagnosis and treatment of Founderitis, also known as Founder's Syndrome, can cure stalled business growth.

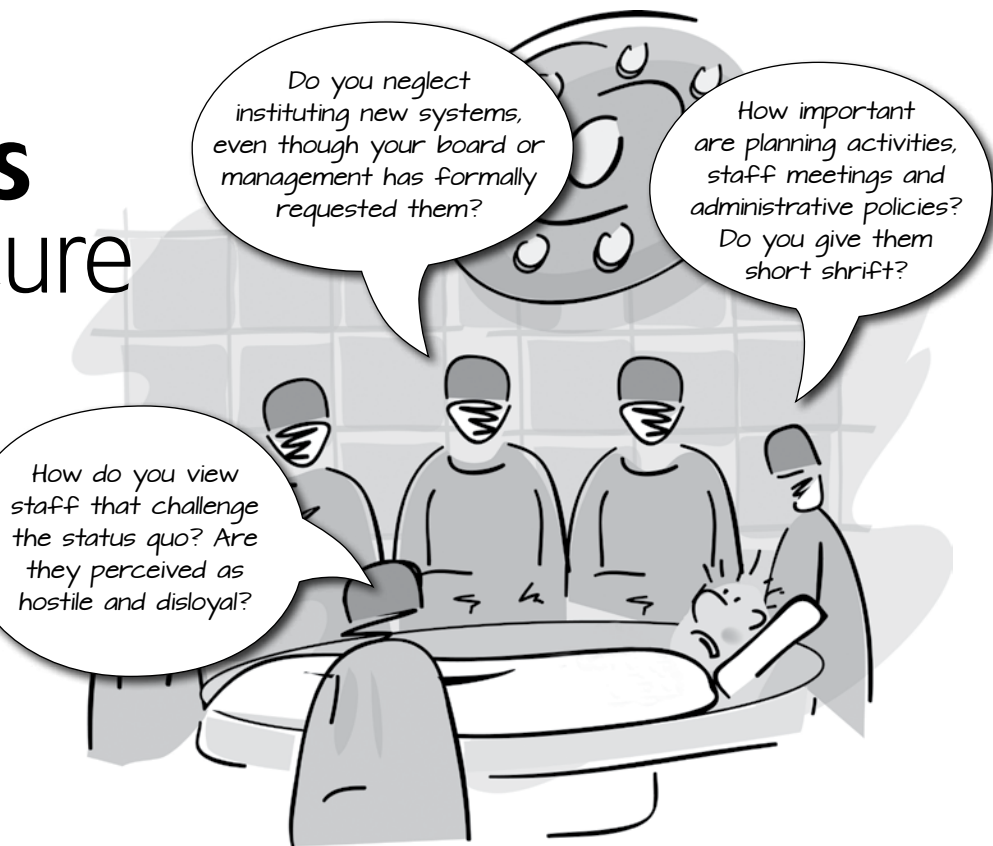
The other day, a friend told me about a 10-year-old business and, more specifically, about its entrepreneurial founder who was unable to grow his company beyond a micro business. After listening for a few minutes, I blurted out, "This person you're describing is suffering from an extreme case of Founderitis."

The entrepreneurial founder my friend described is brilliant — a real craftsperson who had designed some world-class software solutions and hardware products — but the company just hasn't taken off. It's not because of a lack of IQ (intelligence quotient), poor products or a poorly performing team — it's because the leader's lack of emotional intelligence is hindering his ability to manage growth and change.

Lack of emotional intelligence is the hallmark of Founderitis, a condition where a founder holds an organization back from reaching its potential due to spontaneous emotions that trigger self-interest, fear, stress and denial. Luckily, Founderitis isn't terminal. Once diagnosed, it can usually be eradicated.

To diagnose yourself or someone you work with, ask yourself the following questions. If you get more yeses than noes, chances are you are dealing with a case of Founderitis or someone suffering from it:

- › Do you have the constant urge to do everything by yourself and fear delegation?
- › Do you make all decisions yourself without a formal process or input from others?
- › Do you need to be included in every decision and feel angry when you aren't?
- › Do you sometimes feel like everything is slipping out of your control?
- › Do you hire experts only to ignore their counsel?



- › Does your staff frequently offer to "take things off your hands" or suggest they would like greater autonomy?
- › Do you feel you have to have an answer for everything (even things you can't possibly know)?
- › Do you ignore or undermine planning, procedures, processes and controls set up by others?
- › Do you feel threatened when someone on your team disagrees with you or questions you?

If you have a lump in your stomach after answering the above questions, the great news is that you have now recognized the issue. That recognition is an important starting point in curing the condition. Once you realize your approach is not getting results and may, in fact, be jeopardizing your company, this creates an opportunity to explore self-improvement.

CURING FOUNDERITIS

Self-improvement begins with a founder swallowing his or her pride enough to ask for and accept help from trusted advisors. It also requires a genuine willingness to move forward, starting with making amends to the impacted parties and taking concrete steps to repair problems.

The best defense against Founderitis is

developing emotional intelligence, a set of competencies that defines how people manage feelings and interact and communicate with each other. Emotional intelligence has been well defined by Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence* and *Working with Emotional Intelligence*. Let's explore some of the key competencies of emotional intelligence and how to develop them.

1 SELF-AWARENESS is a great skill to begin with. Goleman says self-awareness contains three competencies: emotional awareness, accurate self-assessment and self-confidence. It's important for leaders to develop this competency in themselves and hone the ability to identify it in others. To build self-awareness, think about people you admire and ask: what is it about this person that's different? Once you're confident you've found good role models, ask them about their journeys regarding emotional awareness, self-assessment and self-confidence. You'll be pleasantly surprised how this simple exercise will improve your own competencies.

2 SELF-MANAGEMENT refers to managing your internal states, impulses and resources. Goleman describes the six competencies of self-management as: emotional self-control, integrity, adaptability, initiative, optimism and achievement.

When self-management skills are absent, you may find that you lower your standards (and later regret it) or let your impulses (even the simplest ones) get the best of you. To develop this skill, look to people who are great at self-management. Keep in mind that few people can bat a thousand on self-management in all six competencies all of the time. You may need to find several role models to create benchmarks to start with. For example, you may know someone who has consistently displayed integrity by acting congruently with his or her values, giving you a great transparency benchmark. Or you may meet someone who maintains a steady state of realistic optimism throughout a tough situation, giving you an optimism benchmark.

3 SOCIAL AWARENESS has three parts: empathy, organizational awareness and service orientation. Basically, this is how we handle relationships and our awareness of others' feelings, needs and concerns. This is a big one for leaders who need to take an active interest in everyone's concerns and read the emotional currents and power relationships, all while anticipating, recognizing and meeting the needs of employees and customers.

4 RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT is the final piece of Goleman's research on emotional intelligence. It's the skill of developing others, leading through inspiration, acting as a change catalyst, influencing others and managing conflict. My greatest sense of achievement comes from relationship management: developing others and serving teams through inspiration, supporting change, sharing my influence and resolving conflicts. As a community-minded entrepreneur, I've been practicing this daily throughout my life and feel fortunate to have such an opportunity.

GETTING CONTROL OF FOUNDERITIS

Ultimately, developing self-motivation, self-control, self-awareness and the ability to manage relationships in the face of frustration, along with the ability to control impulses and delay gratification, will enhance your leadership abilities and help you run a more effective, engaged organization. A heightened sense of emotional intelligence will help to regulate your moods and keep distress from swamping empathy and hope.

So, if you think you may have Founderitis, start working through Goleman's competencies and make a conscious effort to develop them. Seek help from others and look to mentors and role models who can help you find more productive and effective ways to move your company forward.

Finally, as my friend Leif says, remind yourself of these simple two words: "Pay attention." It's amazing how well you can lead when you do that. ■

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