

The Firefighting Trap



Hi, Raghav here.

These are 5 dispatches on why social impact founders can't stop being the emergency response team — and what's actually keeping the cycle going

Let's go!

You didn't start this organisation to spend your days putting out fires. But somewhere along the way that became the job - your team escalates, you step in, things get resolved, and it all starts again next week.

This collection is about why that cycle is so hard to break. That's because the way most organisations are set up quietly rewards the wrong thing and the founder who keeps stepping in is often the last person to see it.

Five dispatches from 14 years inside organisations where this pattern was running. (names, dates and other identifiers are changed to maintain confidentiality).

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Email 1: The Fires You Are Putting Out Are Dimming Your Fire

Anjali collapsed into her desk chair at 11 PM, finally closing her laptop after another "emergency" resolved. The proposal was submitted. The crisis was averted. Her team had rallied once again because she'd gathered everyone together, synthesised their inputs, and heroically pulled it all together in the final 48 hours.

She felt that familiar high - the rush of being needed, of being the one who could make it happen when it mattered most.

But beneath that high was something else. A bone-deep exhaustion that no weekend could fix. A creeping resentment toward her calendar and a nagging question she kept pushing away: "Why does it always have to be like this?"

We tell ourselves stories about why the chaos is necessary.

"This is just how important work gets done."

"We're moving too fast to slow down."

"My team needs me to step in - no one else can do it as well."

"Real, messy work looks like this."

But here's what I've seen working with leaders caught in this cycle: The constant firefighting isn't a sign that you're doing important work. It's a sign that something fundamental isn't working.

The pattern looks like this:

A fire erupts. You step in heroically. The crisis gets resolved. There's relief, maybe even some praise. Then a lull. Then another fire and another. Each time, you tell yourself it's just the nature of your work, your industry, and your team's current stage.

But watch what's actually happening beneath the surface:

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Your team is learning they don't need to plan ahead because you'll save them at the last minute. Your calendar is so packed with urgencies that you never get to the important work that would prevent future fires. Your identity becomes so wrapped up in being the hero that you unconsciously create conditions that require heroics.

The real cost: The growth of your organisation - and your own personal and professional development - gets shackled to this pattern.

I watched a founder struggle with this for years. Brilliant, capable, deeply committed to her mission. But every project followed the same arc: things would hang until the final days before deadline, then she'd gather the team, collect their inputs, and heroically assemble everything herself because "only she could do it right."

Her excuse was always the same: too many things on her to-do list, not enough time.

But the truth underneath? A combination of perfectionism, lack of trust in her team, poor prioritisation, and a self-identity built on being indispensable. The chaos wasn't happening to her. She was creating it.

Her team saw it clearly. They were frustrated and burned out by the predictable cycle of poor planning but she never acknowledged the real issue, so nothing changed.

Today's Permission Slip:

You have permission to let some fires burn - because not every fire deserves your attention, and putting out every fire is putting out your future.

This feels dangerous because you believe two things that feel true but aren't:

First, that if you don't step in, everything will fall apart. (It won't - at least not the things that actually matter.)

Second, that constant firefighting is what important, meaningful work looks like. (It's not - it's what unsustainable work looks like.)

Here's what leaders who do genuinely important work without constant chaos understand: They know the difference between being a matchstick that burns with a spark and flames out quickly, versus being a candle that burns evenly for a long time.

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Matchstick leaders create bright, impressive moments. Candle leaders create sustainable impact.

The shift requires getting comfortable with three uncomfortable truths:

Your team doing "good enough" work is better than you doing "perfect" work at the cost of everything else.

Some problems are higher leverage than others - and your job is to focus on those, not to solve everything.

Some fires will burn themselves out or force others to develop capability - and that's not abandonment, that's development.

This Week's Practice:

This week, when something urgent lands in your lap, pause and ask yourself one question before jumping in:

"Is this problem going to kill the business or project if I don't personally solve it right now?"

If the honest answer is no, then your job isn't to solve it. Your job is to let your team solve it, even if their solution looks different from yours.

Yes, there might be a team conflict that sorts itself out.

Yes, a deliverable might be good enough rather than perfect.

Yes, someone might struggle and learn rather than having you swoop in.

That's not negligence. That's leadership.

Because here's the truth nobody tells you: The fires you keep putting out are burning you down and the organisation you're trying to save by being everywhere is actually being limited by your inability to step back.

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This Week's Question:

Which fire are you putting out this week that would actually be better if you let it burn?

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Email 2: The Flat Hierarchy Trap That's Drowning Your Time

You are on your sixth call of the day.

Each person needs "just quick input" on their decision.

Social media strategy. Fundraising approach. Vendor selection. Team structure.

By 4pm, you haven't touched the actual CEO work - the strategic thinking, the key relationships, the future planning that only you can do.

Sound familiar?

Here's what makes this particularly painful: You created a flat organisation because you wanted to move fast. Stay agile. Value everyone's voice equally.

It sounded progressive. Egalitarian. The opposite of those bureaucratic hierarchies that strangle innovation.

But somewhere between 10 and 20 people, something broke.

A few weeks ago I advised a founder facing exactly this. When I interviewed their team - every single person, unanimously - they identified decision-making as the thing that wasn't working.

Not because people couldn't make decisions.

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Because no one knew who should.

Everything was landing on the Founder's plate. From the strategic (fundraising direction) to the tactical (social media posts). The "flat" structure that was supposed to make them fast had made them the slowest thing about themselves.

The Founder was still operating like they had 10 people:

Individual calls with everyone

Accessible to all

Involved in everything

Except now they had 20+ people and no time left to actually be the CEO.

Here's what changes at scale:

At 10 people, you can give meaningful time to each individual. Context flows naturally in conversations. Your involvement in everything makes sense - you're building culture, maintaining quality and staying connected to the work.

But that breaks at 20+.

Because the math simply doesn't work anymore.

If you spend just 30 minutes with each of 20 people weekly, that's 10 hours - before you've done a single hour of actual CEO work.

What got you here - that hands-on, accessible, involved leadership style - is now preventing you from getting there.

This isn't a failure. It's a predictable growing pain that every scaling organisation faces.

Today's Permission Slip:

You have permission to create structure without abandoning your values.

Flat hierarchy doesn't have to mean unclear authority.

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The Practice: The Traffic Light Decision Framework

Instead of trying to be involved in everything or suddenly stepping back from everything, create clarity about what needs your involvement.

Here's what was implemented with that founder:

● Green Decisions: Team member decides. No need to inform CEO.

Example: Scheduling team meetings, routine vendor orders, standard process execution

● Yellow Decisions: Team member decides and informs CEO. If CEO doesn't object within 2 days, team member executes.

Example: New marketing campaign approach, hiring timeline adjustments, budget reallocation under a threshold

● Red Decisions: Team member escalates to CEO with their recommendation. CEO decides.

Example: Major strategic shifts, significant financial commitments, decisions affecting company direction

The key isn't creating the perfect categorisation on day one.

It's creating any categorisation so people know where to start.

Over time, as confidence builds and patterns emerge, decisions naturally move. What starts as Yellow becomes Green. What feels Red today might become Yellow tomorrow.

But you can't build that confidence without first creating the clarity.

This Week's Action:

Pick one person on your team who brings you the most decisions.

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Map their top 5 recurring decisions into Green, Yellow, Red.

Share it with them. Ask: "Does this feel right? What am I missing?"

Start there.

You're not creating bureaucracy. You're creating the clarity that lets people move fast.

Because here's the truth: The most agile organisations aren't the ones without structure.

They're the ones where everyone knows exactly where they have authority to act.

This Week's Question:

Which decisions are you holding onto that your team could handle with clear authority?

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Email 3: Are You Not Tired Of Cleaning Up The Mess Your Team Could Have Avoided?

You're exhausted from putting out the same fires over and over again.

Last week, it was the marketing campaign that blindsided customer support. The week before, a "simple" process change that broke three other workflows. And the week before that, a client meeting that went sideways because your team didn't know the relationship history.

Each time, you found yourself thinking: "How could they not have seen this coming?"

But here's what's really happening: Your team isn't making bad decisions. They're making decisions with half the information.

While you're carrying around years of hard won context - all those cautionary tales, relationship dynamics and "what happened last time we tried this" - your team is flying blind.

They see the goal. They don't see the landmines.

And guess who gets called in to clean up every predictable mess?

Today's Permission Slip:

You have permission to share the context behind your decisions - so your team can stop stepping on landmines you learned to avoid years ago.

I know what you're thinking: "But sharing all that context sounds like more work. More explaining. More time I don't have."

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And you're right - it is more work upfront.

But here's what happens when you don't share context:

Your team keeps making the same avoidable mistakes.

You keep getting pulled into crisis management.

Every decision becomes a potential emergency.

You can never truly step away because they don't know what you know.

Here's the real cost: Every time you clean up a mess instead of preventing it, you trade short-term efficiency for long-term exhaustion. You rush full steam towards destination Burnout.

This Week's Practice:

Instead of just giving directions, add one sentence: "Here's what I've learned from experience..."

Instead of: "We can't launch that campaign next week."

Try: "We can't launch that campaign next week. Here's what I've learned from experience - when we launch during quarterly reviews, sales gets overwhelmed and can't follow up properly. We generate great leads but convert poorly because timing is everything."

It takes 30 seconds longer. But it prevents the three-hour crisis cleanup you'd otherwise be doing next week.

Real-World Example:

I once worked with a leader who became known for his crisis handling. The CEO thought him to be indispensable because he always saved the day.

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But here's what I observed about his team:

They were often unaware of pitfalls that lay ahead with certain kinds of stakeholders.

They didn't know that the CEO preferred certain project activities to always happen a certain way.

They didn't know which timing issues had caused problems before.

The star crisis handler never shared this context with his teams. He hoarded it. So that he could maintain his reputation as the ultimate problem solver who gets the job done.

Many of his team lost their jobs over the years due to this.

Sounds unbelievable, but sadly it is a true story.

Don't be like him. Be better. Help your team out by sharing the hard won context you've acquired over the years.

It's the only way they can succeed without you. And it's the only way you get to breathe easier and have some peace on the weekends.

This Week's Question:

What's the one recurring mess you're tired of cleaning up that your team could prevent if they just knew what you know?

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Email 4: Hot Take - The Quieter Your Team The More Valuable You Are

Your team's latest crisis got praised in the leadership meeting.

But nobody saw what it really cost: the missed family dinner, the midnight emails, the constant anxiety of waiting for the next fire to fight.

When someone asks "What's new with your team?" in a leadership meeting, we've been conditioned to have stories ready:

The crisis we just averted.

The impossible deadline we hit.

The client emergency we solved.

We share these stories because that's what gets noticed. That's what gets remembered. That's what leadership seems to value.

Because just look around:

Crisis managers get visibility.

Firefighters get promoted.

Heroes get celebrated.

Drama gets rewarded.

But here's what everyone's missing: The most valuable leaders aren't the ones running around with extinguishers. They're the ones you barely notice.

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Because while firefighters scale emergencies, prevention scales success.

The evidence? Look at any truly great company:

Their teams aren't in constant crisis.

Their managers aren't working all night.

Their success isn't built on heroics.

They've built something more valuable: Systems that prevent fires from starting.

Today's Permission Slip:

You have permission to build a team that doesn't need constant rescuing - so you can finally have peace of mind when you step away.

This feels uncomfortable because what if your boss thinks you're not committed enough?

What if your team struggles without your constant availability?

What if you miss something important by not being always-on?

But think about it:

Which costs more?

A weekend of overtime fixing an emergency or ten minutes of prevention every day?

Which scales better?

Teaching everyone to fight fires or building a fireproof organization?

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Which attracts better talent?

A culture of constant crisis or a system of sustainable success?

Let's Make This Real:

Start with just one recurring emergency. The one that keeps you up at night. The one that always seems to happen at the worst possible moment.

What typically causes it?

What small change could make it less likely to happen?

Who on your team could help prevent it?

Remember, the future doesn't belong to firefighters. It belongs to fire preventers.

This Week's Question:

What's the one emergency you're most tired of fighting? (You know, the one that always seems to interrupt dinner...)

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Email 5: Are You Measuring What Matters Or Just What's Measurable?

Last week, I was reviewing an Amazon account manager's performance report.

It was impressively detailed - pages of bid adjustments, image updates, copy changes, and daily sales figures. Everything tracked, documented, and reported.

On paper, it looked like peak productivity.

But something was missing:

Any real insight into why campaigns succeeded or failed.

Any deeper understanding of customer behaviour.

Any strategic thinking that could drive breakthrough results.

The manager was so busy tracking and reporting activities that he had no space to think about what those activities meant.

Sound familiar?

We've created a world where:

Every minute of our team's day can be tracked.

Every keystroke can be counted.

Every browser tab can be monitored.

Every interaction can be logged.

And we tell ourselves this is good management. That it's responsible leadership. That it's how we ensure productivity.

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But here's what we're actually creating:

Teams that focus on looking busy instead of creating impact.

Professionals who avoid taking risks that might affect their "productivity scores".

Environments where innovative thinking gets sacrificed for trackable activities.

Cultures where our best talent quietly starts looking elsewhere.

Because here's what monitoring software can't track:

The breakthrough idea that comes during a "non-productive" coffee chat.

The innovation that emerges when someone has space to think deeply.

The process improvement that saves thousands of hours but reduces "trackable activity".

The institutional knowledge we lose when experienced people leave for more trusting environments.

Today's Permission Slip:

You have permission to focus on meaningful impact over measurable activity - and to give your team the space to do the same.

This feels risky because:

What if your team takes advantage of less monitoring?

What if your boss thinks you're not managing tightly enough?

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What if you miss something important?

But consider this - every minute you spend tracking activities is a minute you're not spending on what really moves the needle:

Understanding trends that could transform results.

Spotting patterns that could prevent problems.

Building the trust that enables real innovation.

Creating the space where your best people do their best work.

This Week's Practice:

Look at your team's last performance review or status report. What percentage focuses on activities (what people did) versus impact (what actually changed)?

Try this: In your next team meeting, instead of asking "What did everyone do this week?" ask "What meaningful difference did we make?"

Watch what changes when you shift the conversation from activity to impact.

This Week's Question:

What could your team accomplish if they spent less time proving they're working and more time thinking about how to work better?

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