LUXE BUSINESS BACKEND™ · FOUNDER FIRE CODES™

THE FIRE FIGHTER INSTALLATION GUIDE

The tools to install the playbooks inside your business — for relief that actually holds.

OWNERSHIP & USE

WHAT'S IN THIS GUIDE

READ THIS FIRST

You already know what to do about your fires. You bought the playbooks. You read them. You probably highlighted a few lines and felt something loosen in your chest.

And then Monday happened, and the same four people brought you the same four questions, and the playbook stayed exactly where you left it.

That gap — between knowing the plan and being free of the fire — is the whole reason this guide exists. A playbook tells you what the fire is and how to put it out. Installation is a different job. Installation is the work of wiring the plan into your actual operations so the fire stops finding its way back to your desk.

1 + 1	10	30 DAYS
OWNER AND BACKUP PER FIRE — NAMED, IN WRITING	EDITABLE TOOLKIT FILES WHERE THE METHOD LANDS	OF REAL BUSINESS BEFORE A FIRE COUNTS AS INSTALLED

I have watched a lot of founders read the right plan and stay stuck anyway. When the fire comes back, it comes back for one of four reasons, and every one of them is fixable:

- **Nobody owns it.** The playbook got discussed, everybody nodded, and no single person walked out of the room holding it. "The team's on it" is a sentence that means you're on it.
- **The boundaries never got communicated.** You decided your ops lead could approve refunds under $500. You decided it in your head. She still asks, because nobody ever told her the line moved.
- **The team heard about the change in passing.** A sentence at the end of a call. A Slack message between two other messages. Changes announced in passing get treated like weather — noticed, then ignored.
- **You quietly took it back.** Something wobbled in week two, your hands moved before your brain did, and everyone watching learned the real lesson: the new rules last until the first mistake.

Notice what's missing from that list. Not one of those failures is about effort, intelligence, or whether your team is any good. They are structural failures. Which is good news, because structure is buildable.

WHAT “INSTALLED” ACTUALLY MEANS

A playbook is installed when five things are true. Not felt. True, and checkable:

1. One named person owns the fire, a named backup stands behind them, and both know it.
2. The owner’s decision rights are written down — what they decide alone, what they report after, what they ask about first.
3. Escalation rules exist in writing: which signals come to you, which go to the owner, and how fast.
4. The team and any affected clients were told directly — in a real conversation, then in writing.
5. It has survived 30 days of real business, including at least one wobble you did not take back.

That fifth one is where most installations die. So this guide gives it a whole chapter.

WHAT THIS METHOD ASSUMES ABOUT YOUR BUSINESS

This method assumes you have people — a team, even a small one. Two employees and a VA counts. A bench of steady contractors counts. What it doesn’t require is a big org chart or a COO. Every move in this guide has been installed in businesses of three.

If a chunk of your operation runs on contractors, the method still works — a contractor can absolutely own a fire, hold decision authority within written boundaries, and sit in a weekly review. What changes is the paperwork: put the authority and boundaries in their contract scope, not just the team wiki, and be more deliberate about the backup, because contractors leave with less notice.

If you’re genuinely solo — no team, no contractors — be honest with yourself about what this product can do for you right now. You can and should use the playbook template, the decision principles, and the escalation criteria as the operating structure your first hire walks into. But installation means transfer, and transfer needs a receiver. Build the paper now; hand it off the week you have hands to hand it to.

One more assumption worth naming: this method assumes the fires you’re installing against are real, diagnosed fires — not anxieties wearing operational costumes. If you haven’t worked through the playbooks and you’re not sure which fires are actually costing you, go back to Tier 1 first. Installing a plan for the wrong fire is expensive twice.

HOW THIS GUIDE WORKS WITH THE TOOLKIT

You got two things in this purchase: the guides and a zip of ten editable tool files. This guide is the method. The tools are where the method lands on paper.

Each chapter walks one installation move and points you at the exact toolkit file that captures it. You'll see a gold-and-teal box like this in every chapter:

> **IN YOUR TOOLKIT**
>
> Boxes like this name the companion file for the chapter you're in. Open the file, fill it in as you read, and by the end of the chapter that piece of your installation exists in writing — not in your intentions.

Work the chapters in order. Chapter 2 makes no sense before someone owns the fire, and Chapter 4 has nothing to announce until Chapters 1 through 3 gave you something worth announcing. The whole sequence, done at a reasonable pace, is about two weeks of decisions and one meeting. Then 30 days of holding.

1	2	3	4	5
ASSIGN OWNERSHIP	SET BOUNDARIES	ESCALATION RULES	COMMUNICATE IT	KEEP IT OFF YOU

The method at a glance, so you can see the whole road before you walk it:

MOVE	WHAT GETS DECIDED	TIME IT TAKES
1 · Assign ownership	One owner and one backup per fire, with real authority	An afternoon of decisions, one conversation per owner
2 · Set decision boundaries	What owners decide alone, report after, or bring first	An hour per fire, with the owner in the room
3 · Create escalation rules	Which signals rise, to whom, how fast — and your short list	An hour, once, covering every fire
4 · Communicate the change	The rollout meeting, the memo, the client introductions	One week, one 30-minute meeting

MOVE	WHAT GETS DECIDED	TIME IT TAKES
5 · Keep it off your desk	The 30-day hold: reviews, counts, no take-backs	15 minutes a week

One more note before we start. If you also picked up The Advanced Fires with this bundle, those four playbooks — Fires 06 through 09 — install exactly the same way. Same owners, same boundaries, same escalation rules, same rollout. This method doesn't care which fire you point it at.

And a word about pace, since you're probably tempted to compress this. You could technically make every decision in this guide in one long Saturday, and I'm telling you now not to. Not because the decisions are hard, but because each one lands on people — an owner absorbing a new weight, a team recalibrating where answers live, clients meeting a new face. People absorb structural change at the speed of days, not documents. Two weeks is not slow. Two weeks is how long it takes for a change to be real instead of announced.

> **Reading the playbook is relief. Installing it is release.**
>
> FOUNDER FIRE CODES™

1 ASSIGN OWNERSHIP

Every fire you're still fighting has one thing in common: when you ask who owns it, the answer takes more than two seconds.

"Well, mostly the team handles it, but I keep an eye on…" Stop. That sentence has a translation, and the translation is: I own it. If accountability for a fire is spread across a team, it pools back to the person who cares most about the business — and that person is reading this guide right now.

So the first installation move is blunt: one name per fire. Not a department. Not "whoever's available." A person, with a backup standing behind them, both written down where everyone can see.

This chapter is about making that assignment for real — picking the right name, not the obvious one, and handing over enough actual authority that the assignment means something.

Before the how, be clear on what ownership is not, because founders assign three counterfeits of it constantly and then wonder why nothing changed. Ownership is not being "the point person" — a point person is a switchboard; questions route through them on their way to you. Ownership is not being "in charge of" something in a way that everyone understands means "does the most work on it." And ownership is not a growth opportunity you announce and then supervise closely, where the title moved and the decisions didn't. All three counterfeits share the same tell: when the fire flares, everyone — including the counterfeit owner — still looks at you. Real ownership has a different tell: when the fire flares, people look at the owner, and the owner looks at the problem.

WHY "THE TEAM HANDLES IT" FAILS EVERY TIME

Shared ownership sounds generous and functions like a hole. When three people co-own client onboarding, each one reasonably assumes the other two are watching the thing that slips. Nobody is wrong. The ball still drops. And when it drops, it rolls to you, because you're the only person in the building who feels every dropped ball personally.

Single ownership fixes this without adding a single hour of work. The same tasks happen. The same people do them. What changes is that one person now wakes up responsible for the outcome — and that person is finally, deliberately, not you.

OWNERSHIP MEANS THE OUTCOME, NOT THE TASKS

Get this distinction right before you assign anything, because it's the difference between an owner and a very responsible task-doer.

A task-doer completes the steps. An owner is accountable for the result the steps exist to produce. Maya doing the onboarding checklist every week is task work. Maya owning "every new client kicked off within 48 hours, feeling taken care of" is ownership — and it changes what she does when the checklist isn't enough. When a client's intake form stalls, a task-doer waits, because sending the form was the task and the form was sent. An owner chases, because the outcome is at risk and the outcome is hers.

So when you make the assignment, hand over a result with a definition of done, not a list of duties. "You own the delivery workflow: every project through QA and delivered by its committed date, without me touching it" gives your owner something to steer by. It also gives them room to change the steps — which they will, and which is the point. Owners who can't change the process they own aren't owners; they're operators of your process, and every improvement still has to route through you.

THE TWO WRONG NAMES YOU'LL REACH FOR

When founders pick owners, two traps catch nearly everyone.

The seniority trap: giving the fire to the most senior person because rank feels like insurance. But your senior strategist doesn't touch onboarding on a normal week. She'd be learning the terrain and holding the outcome at the same time — which means, in practice, she'd be forwarding questions to the coordinator who actually knows, adding a relay hop where you wanted a decision. Rank is not proximity, and fires are put out by people standing near them.

The availability trap: giving the fire to whoever has the most room on their plate. Capacity matters — an owner with zero slack will drop the fire the first busy week — but availability alone is the worst single criterion, because the person with the emptiest plate is often the person least connected to the work. If your best candidate is at capacity, that's a workload conversation worth having, not a reason to hand the fire to the wrong person. Move something off their plate. You're about to move plenty off yours.

1 LIST THE FIRES YOU'RE INSTALLING

Pull out the playbooks you're working from — the five core fires, the four advanced ones, or whichever subset is actually burning. Write each fire down as a line item. If you did the Founder Fires Playbook honestly, you already know which two or three cost you the most. Start there. Installing two fires well beats installing nine on paper.

Sequence matters more than founders expect. Install your worst fire first — not the easiest one. The easy win is tempting, but the worst fire is where the team is watching hardest, and a visible release there buys you credibility for every installation after it. Stagger start dates a week or two apart so no single owner is absorbing two new assignments in the same breath, and so your first weekly reviews aren't juggling five brand-new structures at once.

And if the same name keeps showing up in the owner column for multiple fires — common in a small team — that's workable, with a caveat. Two fires per owner is a load; three is a warning sign that you're about to relocate founder dependency instead of dissolving it. One person holding every fire is just you, with extra steps and less context. Spread it, stagger it, or let the second-best candidate grow into one of them.

2 PICK THE OWNER — CLOSEST TO THE WORK, NOT MOST SENIOR

This is where most founders reach for the wrong name. The instinct says give it to the most senior person, because seniority feels like safety. Resist that. The right owner is the person closest to the work: the one who already touches this process every week, hears about breakages first, and feels it personally when the process fails.

Your ops coordinator who processes every refund is a better refund-policy owner than the senior strategist who sees refunds quarterly. Proximity beats rank, because proximity means the owner catches problems while they're still small — which is the entire job you're currently doing from the worst possible seat.

Three signals mark the right name. They already field questions about this work from teammates — the team has informally elected them; you're just making it official. They've flagged a problem in this process before you saw it — proof their radar covers this ground. And when this process breaks, their week gets worse — skin in the game you don't have to manufacture. Two of three and you have your owner. Zero of three and you're about to appoint a supervisor, not an owner — keep looking.

3 NAME THE BACKUP

Owners take vacations. Owners get sick kids and jury duty and, eventually, other jobs. A fire with one owner and no backup is a fire on a timer. Name a second person who can hold the fire for a week without calling you — and make sure they get a copy of everything the owner gets. The backup isn't a co-owner. They're the named person who steps in when the owner is out, and steps back out when the owner returns.

4 GRANT REAL AUTHORITY — OUT LOUD AND IN WRITING

An owner without authority is a scapegoat with a title. If Maya owns the rework fire but every fix she designs needs your sign-off, you didn't assign ownership — you assigned blame and kept the steering wheel. Your team has seen that arrangement before, probably at other jobs, and they can smell it from the parking lot. The fastest way to prove this time is different is to give the authority teeth on day one — a real decision, made by the owner, that visibly does not route through you.

Granting authority means three specific behaviors from you. One: the owner makes the calls inside their boundaries (Chapter 2 draws those lines) without checking in. Two: when team members bring you their questions anyway, you route them back — every time, even when answering would take ten seconds. Three: when the owner makes a call you'd have made differently but that lands inside their boundaries, you back it in public. You can coach it in private later. Publicly, their call stands, or their authority never existed.

5 SET THE START DATE AND SAY IT PLAINLY

Ownership that phases in vaguely never phases in at all. Pick a date — ideally the Monday after your rollout meeting (Chapter 4) — and have the direct conversation with your new owner before you announce anything to anyone else. They should hear it from you, privately, first.

Do this one face to face or on a real call — never over chat. Partly for weight: an assignment delivered in a Slack message weighs what a Slack message weighs. Mostly for information: you need to watch them receive it. A flicker of dread at the mention of one particular client, a glance away when you say "full authority" — those reactions are data about what the handoff package needs, and you can't read them in a typing indicator. Language that works:

SAY THIS TO YOUR NEW OWNER

"I want you to own client onboarding — not help with it, own it. Starting the first of the month, the outcome is yours: every new client kicked off within 48 hours, feeling taken care of. You'll have real authority to run it, and I'm writing down exactly what's your call versus what still comes to me, so you're never guessing. I picked you because you're closest to this work and you catch things before I do. What would you need from me to say yes to this?"

That last question is not decoration. Their answer tells you what's missing from the handoff — access, information, hours, cover on another responsibility. Get them what they name, or shrink the assignment until you can.

AFTER THEY SAY YES

The conversation went well. Maya said yes — maybe a nervous yes, which is normal and honestly a better sign than a breezy one, because it means she heard the weight of it. Three things happen next, in order.

First, put it in writing to her within a day: the outcome she owns, the authority that comes with it, the start date, and what you committed to getting her. Not a contract — a short message she can scroll back to when week two gets loud. People re-read their assignment when they wobble. Give them something worth re-reading.

Second, resist the urge to pre-coach. Founders who've just assigned ownership often spend the next week narrating everything they know about the process "while it's fresh" — a firehose of context the new owner can't absorb and didn't ask for. The structured version of that transfer is the handoff package (the Whole-Picture Handoff™ layers you met in Tier 1, and the playbook template in this toolkit). Build the package. Skip the firehose.

Third, tell the backup. The backup conversation is shorter but real: you're the named second for this fire, here's what that means, here's where everything lives, and you'll shadow the owner at least once a quarter so stepping in is never a cold start. A backup who finds out they're the backup during the emergency is not a backup. They're a bystander with a title.

WHAT THE ROSTER LOOKS LIKE

By the end of this chapter, every fire you're installing has a row like this — and the full nine-fire version lives in your toolkit:

FIRE	OWNER	BACKUP	AUTHORITY GRANTED	STARTS
03 · The Delegation Boomerang	Maya (Ops Lead)	Denise (Ops Coord.)	Runs delivery workflow end to end; reassigns tasks without approval	Mar 2
07 · The Revenue Drop-Off	Jordan (Sales)	Founder — interim	Runs discovery calls solo; discounts to 10% without approval	Mar 9

Notice the second row. It is allowed — sometimes required — for you to be the interim backup while you grow or hire the second name. What's not allowed is leaving the backup column blank and calling it done. A blank in that column is a note to your future self that says "this comes back to me the first week Jordan's out."

FIRE WATCH

If you genuinely cannot put a name in the owner column — nobody on the team is close enough to the work, or capable enough to hold it — you just learned something more important than anything in this chapter. That fire isn't an assignment problem. It's a role gap, and the fix is a hire or a restructure, not a braver delegation attempt. Write the gap down, put yourself in the owner column with an end date, and make the role gap the thing you solve this quarter.

IN YOUR TOOLKIT

Open **02-ownership-backup-assignment.md** and fill in the roster for every fire you're installing — owner, backup, authority, start date. It includes the owner-selection criteria from this chapter so you can pressure-test each name. Then open **01-fire-playbook-template.md**: it's the blank master playbook, and the owner's name goes on page one of every playbook you customize.

★ FIRE MARSHAL'S NOTE

When someone asks you "who should I talk to about this?", stop answering from memory — answer with "check the roster," even when the name is on the tip of your tongue. The roster only becomes the company's directory if you stop competing with it, and every from-memory answer keeps you employed as the org chart.

A fire without a name on it has your name on it.

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2 SET DECISION BOUNDARIES

Week one of new ownership, and Maya is at your door. “Quick question — is it okay if I…”

Of course she’s asking. You gave her the fire, but you never told her where her authority ends, and a smart person with undefined authority does the only safe thing available: she checks. Every time. Escalating everything isn’t a confidence problem — it’s the rational move when nobody drew the lines.

Decision boundaries are those lines, in writing. They answer three questions for every decision the fire produces: What does the owner decide alone? What do they decide and tell you after? What do they bring to you first? Once those answers exist on paper, “quick question” traffic drops like somebody closed a highway.

And understand what those quick questions have actually been costing you, because “it only takes ten seconds to answer” is the most expensive sentence in your operation. The ten seconds is real. So is the context switch on either side of it — the work you dropped, the thread you lost, the twenty minutes it takes to get your head back where it was. Eight quick questions a day is most of a deep-work block, gone, every day, converted into answers your team could have generated themselves with a table and a set of principles. This chapter is you buying those blocks back.

THE THREE THRESHOLD TYPES

Almost every decision in a service business can be sorted using three thresholds. Set numbers for each and you’ve covered most of the map:

- **Spend.** The dollar line. Below it, the owner spends without asking — refunds, software, contractor hours, make-it-right gestures. Above it, they ask. Most founders set this line insultingly low. If your ops lead can’t approve a $200 refund without you, you haven’t delegated refunds; you’ve delegated the paperwork.
- **Impact.** How reversible is it? A decision that can be undone next week belongs to the owner, almost regardless of topic. A decision that locks you in for a year — annual contracts, policy changes, anything affecting every client at once — routes up.
- **Client-facing risk.** Could this decision cost you a client relationship or touch your public reputation? Routine client communication belongs to the owner. A message to an already-angry client about a serious miss, or anything that will be screenshot-able, gets another set of eyes first.

WHY YOUR LINES ARE PROBABLY TOO TIGHT

Before you set a single number, know your own bias, because it runs one direction: founders draw boundary lines tight. Not because the team is untrustworthy — because approval feels like safety, and every dollar of authority you release feels like a dollar of risk you're accepting.

Run the actual math on that feeling. Say your ops lead approves refunds up to $500 and, worst case, makes a genuinely wrong call once a quarter. That's $2,000 a year of downside — ceiling, not estimate. Now price the current arrangement: every refund waiting on you means an interrupted afternoon for you, a client waiting an extra day for resolution, and an owner learning that her judgment isn't actually trusted. You are paying thousands to insure against hundreds. Tight lines feel careful. They're expensive.

A decent calibration test for any threshold: if the owner used their full authority wrongly once this quarter, would it materially hurt the business — or just annoy you? If the honest answer is "annoy me," the line goes higher. Material harm is what column three is for. Annoyance is what growth feels like from the founder's chair.

1 HARVEST LAST MONTH'S DECISIONS

Don't build boundaries from imagination — build them from receipts. Scroll back through 30 days of messages and meetings and list every decision that routed through you for this fire. Every "is it okay if," every approval, every "what should I do about." That list is the real decision surface of this fire, and it's usually 15 to 25 items. Shorter than you feared.

While you're harvesting, notice which questions repeat. A question that shows up four times in a month isn't a question — it's a policy nobody wrote down, arriving on foot, over and over, wearing slightly different clothes. Those repeats become your best boundary rows, because you already know your answer: you've given it four times. Write the answer into the table once and retire the question forever.

2 SORT EVERY DECISION INTO THREE COLUMNS

Owner decides. Owner decides, tells you after. Owner brings to you first. Sort honestly — and expect to catch yourself putting things in the third column that belong in the first. The test for column three is real risk, not personal comfort. “I’d want to know” is what column two is for.

Column two deserves a word, because it’s the underrated one. “Decide and tell me after” is how you stay informed without staying involved — the owner moves at full speed, and you get a one-line note in the channel instead of a meeting on your calendar. It’s also the natural halfway house for decisions you’re not ready to fully release: park them in column two for a month, read the notes, and when every note would have been your call anyway — and it will be — promote the row to column one. The columns aren’t fixed castes. They’re a conveyor belt moving decisions away from you at the speed the evidence allows.

3 SET THE NUMBERS

Vague boundaries rot. “Small refunds are your call” will be re-litigated within a month, because your definition of small and Maya’s definition of small will drift apart the first time one stings. Numbers don’t drift. Write “refunds up to $500,” “discounts to 10%,” “spend to $300/month recurring.” If a number later proves wrong, change the number — that’s a five-minute edit, not a renegotiation of trust.

4 WRITE THE OPERATING PRINCIPLES

Thresholds can't cover everything, and the gap between rules is where owners freeze or freelance. Operating principles fill the gap: short, plain statements of how you think, so people can decide gray areas the way you would without asking you. Not values-poster language — decision language. A few of mine:

- When a client is upset, protect the relationship first and the invoice second. We can recover money faster than trust.
- A fast answer today beats a perfect answer Thursday. Say what we know, flag what we don't, follow up.
- If a mistake is ours, we say so plainly and fix it at our cost. No creative narrating.
- Never promise a date the delivery team hasn't confirmed.
- When two principles collide, pick the one that protects the client experience, then flag it in the weekly review.

Write yours from evidence, not aspiration: think of the last five judgment calls you made and what rule you were actually following. That rule, in your natural wording, is a principle. Five to seven of them is plenty.

5 PUBLISH THE TABLE WHERE THE WORK HAPPENS

Boundaries buried in a Google Doc nobody opens are boundaries that don't exist. Put the decision table wherever your team already looks daily — pinned in the ops channel, front page of the team wiki, taped inside the project management tool. Publishing also changes what the table is: a private agreement between you and one owner is a favor that can be quietly revoked; a published table is policy, and policy protects the owner when a teammate second-guesses her call. "It's on the table" ends arguments she'd otherwise have to win with your name. Then hand it over out loud:

> **SAY THIS WHEN YOU HAND OVER THE BOUNDARIES**
>
> *"From Monday, anything in your column is your call — and I mean actually your call. You don't need to run it by me, and if you do run it by me, I'm going to point you right back at this table. Column two, decide it and drop a note in the channel so I'm not surprised. Column three still comes to me, and that list is short on purpose. If something comes up that isn't on this table anywhere, use the operating principles, make the call you can defend, and we'll add it to the table at the weekly review."*

WHEN THE OWNER ASKS FOR LESS

Sometimes the pushback on new boundaries comes from the direction you didn't brace for: the owner wants a smaller column. "Can we say $250 instead of $500? I'd just feel better checking on the bigger ones."

Don't bulldoze it, and don't cave to it either — both moves teach the wrong lesson. What the request usually means is that the authority arrived without the equipment: she doesn't yet trust her own read on which refunds are clean and which smell like a bigger problem. That's not a threshold issue. That's a missing Standard and a missing Judgment layer — she hasn't seen enough examples of what a good call looks like at $400.

So split the difference in time, not in dollars: keep the line at $500, and for the first three weeks she sends you a one-line note after each call over $250 — not for approval, for calibration. You reply with "exactly right" or a sentence of nuance. Three weeks of that builds the judgment the number was always going to require, and the training wheels come off on a date you both set in advance. Authority with a calibration period sticks. Authority negotiated downward shrinks again every time something feels uncomfortable, until the column is decorative and the decisions are yours again.

A WORKING EXAMPLE

DECISION AREA	OWNER DECIDES	DECIDES & TELLS AFTER	BRINGS FIRST
Refunds & credits	Up to $500	$500–$1,500	Over $1,500, or any legal threat
Client deadlines	Shifts up to 3 business days	Shifts up to 1 week	Anything past a contracted date
Spending	One-time to $300	To $300/mo recurring	New contracts, anything annual
Client comms	All routine messages	Service-recovery messages	Angry client + serious miss
Team tasks	All reassignments in their lane	Pulling help from another lane	Anything touching pay or hours

HOW A PRINCIPLE EARNS ITS KEEP

Watch a principle do its job. Thursday afternoon, a client emails Maya asking to push their launch date two weeks — but they're also 30 days behind on an invoice. No row on the decision table covers "deadline shift plus unpaid invoice." Old wiring: Maya pings you, you answer between meetings, the client waits a day, and the table just taught everyone it can't be trusted with anything interesting.

New wiring: Maya reads "protect the relationship first and the invoice second" next to "never promise a date the delivery team hasn't confirmed." She grants the shift warmly, confirms the new date with delivery before committing it, and separately flags the invoice to bookkeeping — two principles, one clean decision, zero founder involvement. Friday, it's a 30-second mention in the review, and "deadline changes for past-due clients" becomes a new row on the table. That last move matters: gray areas that reach the review become rules, which means your decision table gets smarter every week without you writing a manifesto up front.

That's also why five principles beat fifteen. Principles have to be recallable under mild pressure on a Thursday afternoon. A page of them becomes furniture.

FIRE WATCH

Watch your own behavior in week one, because you will be tempted to answer questions that now belong in the owner's column — it feels helpful, it takes ten seconds, and it quietly re-wires the whole fire back through you. Every question you answer teaches the team where answers live. Point at the table instead. The table has to become the answer machine, and it only becomes that if you stop competing with it.

IN YOUR TOOLKIT

Open **03-decision-authority-guidelines.md**. It holds the role-by-role decision table, the spend and risk threshold builders, and five example operating principles with fill-in slots for your own. Fill it in with your owner in the room — the negotiation over where each line sits is half the value.

★ **FIRE MARSHAL'S NOTE**

Revisit your dollar thresholds every time revenue grows by half. A $500 refund line drawn in a $20k month is generous; the same line in a $60k month is a leash. Boundaries that don't scale with the business quietly re-tighten on their own — and nobody will tell you, because asking for more authority feels greedy.

People don't escalate because they're unsure. They escalate because nobody drew the lines.

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3 CREATE ESCALATION RULES

Somewhere in your company's unwritten operating manual is a rule that's costing you ten hours a week: "When in doubt, ask the founder."

Nobody wrote it. Everybody follows it. And it survives every delegation attempt you've ever made, because doubt is unlimited and you never gave your team anything else to do with theirs.

Escalation itself isn't the enemy — some things genuinely should reach you fast, and a team that never escalates is scarier than one that always does. The enemy is untyped escalation: everything rising to you by default because nobody defined which signals rise, to whom, and how fast. This chapter replaces the default with rules. Written signals in, "when in doubt, ask the boss" out.

Notice, too, that the old rule was never actually about you being needed. It was about you being the only path anyone could defend. If a teammate sits on a judgment call and it goes wrong, that's on them; if they asked you first, they're covered no matter what happens. You built — accidentally, lovingly — a system where asking you is free insurance and deciding alone is personal risk. Nobody beats that incentive with a pep talk about empowerment. You beat it by changing the insurance: written rules that make the defensible path run through the owner and the map instead of through your inbox.

1 DEFINE ESCALATION SIGNALS — FACTS, NOT FEELINGS

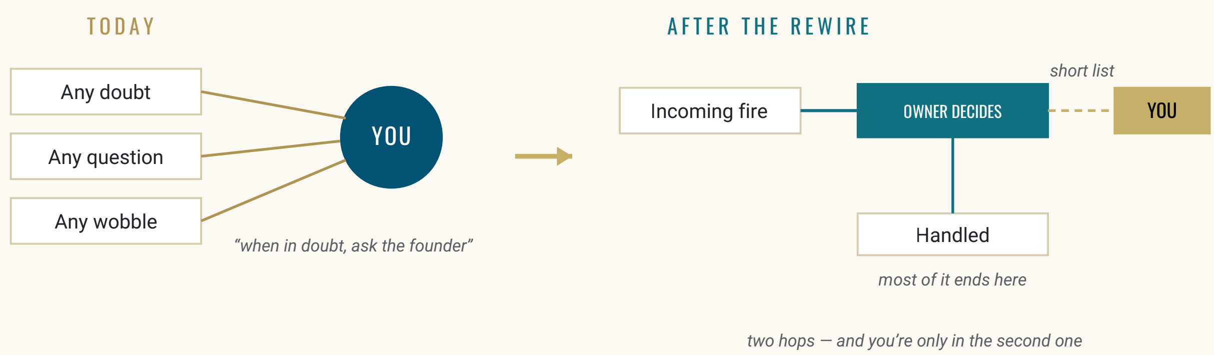
An escalation signal has to be something a reasonable person can observe, not a vibe they have to interpret. "Escalate if it seems serious" puts the judgment burden right back on the person you're trying to relieve. Compare: "Escalate if a client mentions canceling, refunding, or a lawyer." That's checkable. Either they said it or they didn't.

Good signals sound like: a client uses the words cancel, refund, dispute, or lawyer. A deliverable will miss a contracted date. The same error appears twice in one week. A payment over $1,000 fails. Anything is about to go out publicly with a claim or price we haven't used before. Write signals for each fire you're installing — the playbooks tell you what each fire's dangerous moments look like; turn those moments into observable triggers.

2 ROUTE EACH SIGNAL TO A PERSON — AND MOSTLY NOT TO YOU

Here's the shift that makes this chapter work: the fire's owner is the first escalation stop, not you. The team escalates to Maya. Maya handles almost all of it inside her boundaries. Maya escalates to you only when a signal on *your* short list fires. Two hops, and you're only in the second one. If your escalation map has you as the first stop for anything a junior teammate can trigger, you rebuilt the old wiring with extra paperwork.

THE ESCALATION REWIRE — THE OWNER IS THE FIRST STOP



Signals route to the owner, who handles almost everything inside written boundaries. You appear once — at the end, for the short list only.

3 SET THE SPEED

Every signal gets a clock: same hour, same day, or next weekly review. This matters in both directions — it guarantees the truly urgent moves fast, and it gives everything else permission to wait. Half your current interruptions are things that could have waited four days and didn't know they were allowed to.

Three speeds is the whole menu, on purpose. "Same hour" is for the handful of signals where minutes change outcomes — a client mid-cancellation, money actively leaking. "Same day" covers most real escalations: serious, not burning. "Next weekly review" is the workhorse, and it's the one founders underuse — patterns, near-misses, boundary questions, anything where the value is in the discussion rather than the speed. If you find yourself inventing a fourth speed called "whenever you see this message," congratulations, you've rebuilt the DM habit with extra steps. Three speeds. Pick one per signal and write it down.

4 WRITE THE NEVER-ESCALATE LIST

Just as load-bearing as the escalation list: the list of things that must not come to you anymore, in writing, so nobody has to guess. Anything with an answer in the documentation. Any decision inside the owner's published boundaries. Routine scheduling, routine client questions, tool hiccups with workarounds, first-time small mistakes already being fixed. When these show up anyway — and they will — the response is a redirect, not an answer.

Publishing this list does something subtle for your team's nervous system. Right now, every person deciding whether to interrupt you is running a private calculation — is this worth her time? will I look careless if I don't flag it? will I look helpless if I do? That calculation is exhausting, it runs dozens of times a day across the team, and it errs toward interrupting you because interrupting feels safer than missing something. The never-escalate list deletes the calculation. It converts "should I ask the boss?" from a judgment call into a lookup. People are faster, calmer, and more decisive when checking a list replaces reading their boss's mind.

> **SAY THIS WHEN SOMETHING LANDS ON YOU ANYWAY**
>
> *"Good catch — and this one's Maya's. She owns onboarding now, so take it straight to her; you don't need me in the loop. If you bring it to me first, I'm just going to slow you down."*

Say it warm, say it every time, and say it even when you know the answer. Especially when you know the answer. The fifth redirect is the one that changes behavior.

And keep an exceptions log — a simple running list of every time something off-list reached you anyway and you engaged with it. No shame attached; just the date, the item, and why you stepped in. Review it monthly. If the same category shows up three times, one of two things is true: the escalation map has a hole (add the signal), or you have a habit (that's what the log is for — you can't break a pattern you're not counting). The log lives in your founder-boundaries toolkit file, one table, thirty seconds an entry.

> **THE ESCALATION MESSAGE FORMAT**
>
> *"ESCALATION — Riley account. What happened: Riley's CFO emailed at 2pm asking to pause the contract, citing budget. What I've done: acknowledged within the hour, pulled the account history, drafted a retention offer per the guidelines. What I need from you: fifteen minutes today — this crosses the 'client at risk of ending' line, so the final call is yours. Draft attached."*

That's a two-minute read that arrives with the thinking already done. Compare it to "hey, do you have a sec? something weird with Riley" — same event, forty-five minutes of your day, and the owner learned nothing about handling it. Require the format. It feels stiff for a week and then it just becomes how urgent things move.

5 DRAW YOUR FOUNDER INVOLVEMENT BOUNDARIES

Now flip the lens. Instead of listing what escapes you, write the short list of things that *should* still route to you — because some things genuinely should, and naming them is what makes it safe to release everything else. For most founders at this stage, the honest list looks something like:

- Any client relationship at genuine risk of ending — cancel, refund-in-full, or lawyer language.
- Money past the top threshold: spending, discounts, or refunds above the published lines.
- Anything legal, regulatory, or reputational — contracts, disputes, press, public complaints.
- Hiring, firing, pay, and role changes.
- New offers, pricing changes, and anything that changes what the company promises.

Then write the standing rule that covers the entire rest of the universe: **if it's not on my list, it goes to the owner.** One sentence. Say it at the rollout, print it in the memo, repeat it at reviews. That sentence is the formal death certificate for "when in doubt, ask the boss" — doubt now has a new address.

THE OFFICE-HOURS PATTERN

There's a category of founder-bound items that isn't urgent and isn't really escalation: things the team legitimately wants your read on. Strategy questions. A judgment call the owner made and wants to sanity-check. An idea. Under the old wiring, these arrived as interruptions all week long, each one small, the sum of them your whole Tuesday.

Give them a container instead. Pick one standing block — say, Thursdays from 2 to 3 — and make it the address for everything founder-worthy that can wait. The team keeps a running list; you work through it in one sitting; anything urgent still uses the escalation map. Two things happen fast. First, your week consolidates — fifteen scattered interruptions become one focused hour. Second, and better: half the list resolves itself before Thursday arrives. Questions with a four-day wait attached have a way of finding their own answers, and every self-resolved question is a rep of the exact independence you're building. The list of what didn't wait — what people still pinged you about — is free diagnostic data. Every item on it is either a real emergency or a boundary that needs restating.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE PER FIRE

Escalation signals get sharper when you write them per fire rather than in general. A few examples of translating each fire's dangerous moment into an observable trigger: for the Approval Pileup, "a decision has been waiting on any single person for more than two business days." For the Rework Loop, "the same deliverable fails the standard twice." For the Broken Handoff, "a task changes hands without a confirmed receiver." For the Revenue Drop-Off, "a qualified lead has had no follow-up for 72 hours." For the Trust Trap, "a client bypasses the account lead to reach the founder directly" — a signal that goes to the *owner*, not to you, which tells you how far this thinking can carry. The full per-fire signal sets are in the toolkit file; customize them to your numbers.

THE ESCALATION MAP, ON ONE PAGE

SIGNAL	GOES TO	HOW FAST	FOUNDER NEEDED?
Client says cancel / refund / lawyer	Owner, then founder	Same hour	Yes — same day
Contracted deadline will be missed	Owner	Same day	Only if client at risk
Same error twice in a week	Owner	Same day	No — weekly review note
Spend/refund above threshold	Founder	Same day	Yes
Question answered in the docs	The docs	—	No. Never.

TWO FAILURE MODES TO WATCH FOR

New escalation systems fail in two opposite directions, and you should watch for both in the first month.

Over-escalation is the familiar one: everything still floods upward, just with better formatting. Usually it means the boundaries from Chapter 2 are too tight or too vague — people escalate what they don't feel authorized to decide. The fix is almost never "coach the team to escalate less." The fix is widening or clarifying the written authority, then redirecting consistently until the new lines feel real.

Under-escalation is quieter and more dangerous: the team, proud of the new independence or scared of looking needy, sits on something that genuinely needed you. You find out about the near-cancellation two weeks late. If that happens, resist the impulse to loosen everything — that's how founders re-wire the whole company through themselves over one scare. Instead, treat it as one missing signal: name it, add it to the map, and thank the person who finally surfaced it. Loudly. The way your team learns escalation is safe is by watching what happens to the first person who escalates something scary.

FIRE WATCH

The escalation message itself needs a format, or every escalation becomes a conversation. Require three parts: what happened (facts only), what the owner has already done or decided, and what they need from the person they're escalating to — a decision, an approval, or just awareness. An escalation that arrives as "hey, got a sec?" costs you twenty minutes. The same escalation in three labeled lines costs you two.

IN YOUR TOOLKIT

Two files carry this chapter. **04-escalation-rules.md** holds the signal → who → how fast map, per-fire signal examples, the never-escalate list, and the escalation message script. **05-founder-involvement-boundaries.md** holds your short list, the standing rule, an office-hours pattern that catches the non-urgent stuff, and the no-take-backs pledge you'll meet again in Chapter 5.

★ FIRE MARSHAL'S NOTE

Have owners time-stamp escalations: when the signal fired, and when it reached its person. The gap between those two stamps is your real response speed, and it's the first number that rots when a map is going stale — long before anyone notices the map itself. A widening gap two weeks running means a signal is unclear or an owner is overloaded.

> "When in doubt, ask me" isn't a policy. It's a leash with your hand on both ends.
>
> FOUNDER FIRE CODES™

4 COMMUNICATE THE CHANGE

You've made real decisions in the last three chapters. Owners named. Boundaries drawn. Escalation rules written. And right now, all of it exists in exactly one place: your documents.

A structural change your team hasn't been told about directly isn't a change yet — it's a plan. And teams have finely tuned radar for the difference between an announcement and a mention. Mention the new ownership at the tail end of a status call and your team will nod, file it under "things the boss says when she's read something," and keep bringing you their questions. You've trained them well, after all. Untraining them takes a real moment: a meeting held for this purpose, a message in writing, and — where clients are affected — a deliberate introduction, not a quiet swap.

1 HOLD THE ROLLOUT MEETING — A REAL ONE

Thirty minutes, its own calendar slot, everyone affected in the room. The agenda is simple: why this is happening, what specifically changes and when, who owns what, where the boundary tables and escalation rules live, and open questions. Do not stack it onto an existing meeting. The separate invite is itself a message: this is structural, not a mood.

Run the timing tight: five minutes on the why, ten on the specifics — roster on screen, boundaries and escalation map shown live so everyone sees where the documents actually live — and the rest for questions. Let the new owners speak during the specifics, even briefly. An owner who says "here's how refund questions come to me starting Monday" in their own voice has claimed the role in front of witnesses, and that does more for the transfer than anything you can say on their behalf.

Who's in the room matters too. Everyone whose routing changes attends — including part-timers and steady contractors. The people most likely to keep bringing you questions out of habit are precisely the people most likely to get left off a "core team" invite.

2 SAY THE WHY STRAIGHT — AND GET AHEAD OF THE FEAR

When founders announce delegation changes, teams privately run one of two stories: "we screwed up and this is the consequence," or "she's checked out and this is the beginning of her leaving." Neither is true, so don't leave the vacuum they grow in. Open with the actual reason:

SAY THIS TO OPEN THE ROLLOUT MEETING

"I want to tell you about a change I'm making, and I want to start with why, because I know how changes like this can read. Right now, too many decisions in this company route through me — not because y'all can't make them, but because I never built the structure that lets you make them. That's on me, and it's slowing all of us down. Every question that waits on my inbox is work stalled and a client waiting.

"So starting Monday, this changes. Maya owns onboarding — fully. Jordan owns the sales pipeline. Each owner has written authority: what's their call, what they loop me in on. There's an escalation map for the genuinely urgent stuff. None of this is about anyone underperforming, and I'm not going anywhere — I'm moving my attention to the work only I can do, and handing you the authority you've honestly been ready for. What questions do you have?"

Then actually take the questions — and know which ones are coming, because they're remarkably consistent from team to team.

"Is this about trust? Did we do something?" Answer it head-on: no — and the proof is the direction of the change. You don't hand more authority to people you don't trust. If a specific mistake is on everyone's mind, name it and separate it: that got handled when it happened; this is structural and was coming either way.

"What happens the first time I get it wrong?" This is the real question under most of the silence in the room, and it deserves the Chapter 5 answer said out loud: when something wobbles, we fix the package, not the person — the assumption is the handoff was missing a layer, and we find it together. Say that sentence in the meeting. You'll want witnesses holding you to it later.

"So we can't come to you anymore?" Careful here — a flat "come to me anytime" undoes the whole rollout, and a flat "no" reads cold. The honest answer: for the work, go to the owner — that's not a door closing, it's the answer getting faster. For everything else — ideas, concerns, how you're doing — the door is what it's always been.

"Does the owner get paid more?" Don't improvise compensation in a rollout meeting. If ownership meaningfully expands someone's role, deal with it — privately, before the announcement, so the owner walks in already squared. If asked in the room: "role and compensation conversations happen one-on-one, and yes, I've had them."

3 PUT IT IN WRITING THE SAME DAY

Meetings evaporate. Before the day ends, send the written version: what changed, effective when, the ownership roster, links to the decision tables and escalation rules, and the standing rule — if it's not on my list, it goes to the owner. This message is the artifact people check three weeks from now when memories argue. It also covers whoever was out sick, and it becomes onboarding material for every future hire, who will simply believe this is how the company has always worked. Which, from now on, it is.

Know the line between what goes in writing and what stays verbal, because both matter. In writing: the structural facts — who owns what, the boundaries, the rules, the dates. Facts in writing settle arguments before they start. Verbal, and only verbal: the confidence — your belief in the specific people, your honest "this is on me for not building it sooner," the answer to the nervous question after the meeting. Confidence in a memo reads like HR wrote it; structure delivered only out loud dissolves in a month. Facts on paper, faith in person. Teams need both, from different channels.

4 TELL CLIENTS LIKE IT'S AN UPGRADE — BECAUSE IT IS

Where a fire touches clients — you stepping back from onboarding calls, a team member taking over their check-ins — clients need their own communication, and the framing carries everything. Announce it apologetically ("unfortunately I won't be as available…") and clients hear demotion: they used to have the founder and now they get the help. Announce it as a trust transfer and they hear investment.

The mechanics of trust transfer get a full playbook in The Advanced Fires (Fire 06), but the rollout version is this: introduce the team member as the expert they are, by name, with credentials and context — never as "someone from my team." And stay visibly in the frame at first: you're not vanishing, you're adding depth to their account.

Expect at least one client to push back — usually your longest-tenured one, usually kindly: "I'm sure she's great, but can I just keep working with you?" Have your answer ready before the email arrives, because an improvised answer to that question caves every time. The shape of the good answer: warmth, a no that doesn't sound like a no, and a reason framed entirely in their interest — Maya is closer to their account's daily reality than you are, which means faster answers and fewer things waiting on your calendar. The word-for-word version lives in the client communication templates, and Fire 06 covers the harder cases.

While you're at it, move the channel, not just the person. If clients keep texting your personal cell, the warmest introduction on earth won't stop them — the channel itself is wired to you. Part of every client transition is a gentle re-route: here's the address for account questions now, here's the response time you can count on, and here's why that's faster than catching me between meetings. Then honor it — when the text arrives anyway, reply once, warmly, from the new channel, with the owner looped in. Clients learn routing the same way teams do: from where the answers actually come from.

> **SAY THIS TO A CLIENT WHOSE TOUCHPOINT IS CHANGING**
>
> *"I'm making a change on your account that I'm genuinely excited about. Starting next month, Maya Chen leads your monthly strategy calls. Maya has run onboarding and delivery for us for two years — she's the reason your launch went as smoothly as it did, even if I was the face on the calls. She knows your account inside out, and frankly she catches details faster than I do. I'm still here — I review every account monthly and I'm one email away — but day to day, you're getting our best. Maya's joining our next call so the handoff is seamless."*

5 MATCH THE MESSAGE TO THE AUDIENCE

One announcement doesn't fit everyone. Map it:

AUDIENCE	WHAT THEY NEED TO HEAR	CHANNEL	WHEN
New owners	The full assignment, authority, and your backing	Private 1:1	Before anything else
Whole team	The why, the roster, the standing rule	Rollout meeting + memo	Same day
Affected clients	Expert introduction, continuity, your continued oversight	Personal email + joint call	Before the first changed touchpoint
Contractors & partners	Who their contact is now, for what	Short written note	Rollout week

THE ONE-WEEK FOLLOW-UP

One rollout meeting does not rewire habits that took years to build, so schedule the reinforcement before you need it: a ten-minute follow-up exactly one week out. The agenda is three questions. What's working? Where has the new routing been confusing? And — asked without a drop of defensiveness — where have I already broken my own rules? Ask that last one sincerely, because you probably have, and letting the team say so out loud does more for the installation than another memo ever could. A founder who can hear "you answered Jasmine's refund question on Tuesday" and respond "you're right, I did — Maya's call, my mistake" just made the new structure ten times more believable.

The follow-up is also where week-one friction gets separated into its two kinds: friction because the new system has a gap (fix the system today), and friction because the new system is unfamiliar (leave it alone; unfamiliar fades). Owners can usually tell you which is which if you ask them directly.

FIRE WATCH

The most dangerous communication in this whole chapter is the one you don't plan: the first time after rollout that someone DMs you directly and you just… answer. That reply is an announcement too, and it announces that the memo was decorative. In rollout week, treat every misdirected question as a rep: redirect warmly, point at the roster, no exceptions. The team learns the new wiring from what you do, not from what you sent.

IN YOUR TOOLKIT

Three files carry this chapter. **06-team-rollout-script.md** has the meeting agenda, the word-for-word opening, team FAQ answers, and the one-week follow-up script. **07-internal-communication-templates.md** has the ready-to-send memos — ownership announcement, boundary memo, escalation memo, review invites. **08-client-communication-templates.md** has the client-facing pieces: the expert introduction, the transition email, and the response to "can I just work with you?"

★ FIRE MARSHAL'S NOTE

Rehearse the rollout opening once, out loud, alone. Founders who wing it hedge — "we're going to try something new" — and the team hears the word *try*, files the change as an experiment, and waits it out. Delivered plainly, the same announcement lands as settled. The script only protects you if the delivery matches it.

A change your team heard about in passing is a change they're allowed to ignore.

FOUNDER FIRE CODES™

5 KEEP IT FROM LANDING BACK ON YOU

Day 12. The new owner is running the process, and the process wobbles — a client email goes out with the wrong date, a handoff slips, something you'd have caught. Your hands are on the keyboard before your brain is in the room.

This is the moment every installation either survives or quietly dies. Take the work back now — even once, even "just this time" — and everyone watching learns the truth underneath the rollout: the new structure lasts until the first mistake, and the founder is still the real owner of everything. Your team will not resent this. They'll relax into it. Escalations will drift up, questions will find your inbox again, and in six weeks the fire is back on your desk wearing a new coat.

And know your own moves, because taking it back rarely looks like taking it back. It has four disguises. There's the rescue: jumping in to fix the wobble yourself because the client is waiting and you're fastest. The shadow: letting the owner keep the title while you quietly re-review everything before it ships. The hedge: "loop me in on this one, just this once" — said four times in two weeks. And the drift: answering the DMs that should've been redirects, one harmless answer at a time, until the routing is back where it started. Not one of these feels like a decision while you're doing it. Every one of them is.

The first 30 days are not a victory lap. They're the curing period, and this chapter is how you hold.

1 RUN THE 30 DAYS ON A CHECKLIST, NOT ON VIBES

Week one: every owner conversation done, rollout held, memo sent, boundaries published, escalation map live. Week two: first weekly fire review held, first redirects delivered, any boundary that's already pinching adjusted in writing. Weeks three and four: client transitions completed, at least one full cycle of each fire's process run without you, fire counts compared week over week. The full sequence lives in your toolkit as checkboxes — use it, because in a busy month "I think we're mostly rolled out" is how installations dissolve.

The checklist earns its keep on the bad weeks, not the good ones. Some Thursday in week two, a client emergency will eat the day, the review will feel skippable, and "we'll catch up next week" will sound reasonable. Open the checklist instead and do the smallest unchecked box. Installations don't usually die of crisis. They die of three reasonable-sounding postponements in a row.

2 ADOPT THE NO-TAKE-BACKS RULE: FIX THE PACKAGE, NOT THE PERSON

Write this somewhere you'll see it: when the work wobbles, the handoff was incomplete — not the human. If you handed off what to do but not when it's due, whose fault is the missed timing? If you handed off the steps but never showed what great looks like next to what's unacceptable, whose fault is the quality gap?

This is the Whole-Picture Handoff™ logic, and it's your diagnostic every single time something comes back wrong. Six layers ship with every real transfer — the What, the When, the Why, the How, the Standard, the Judgment, plus the Voice where client-facing work is involved. When a wobble happens, find the missing layer, add it to the package, and hand the work right back. The package gets stronger with every wobble. That's the system working, not failing.

Make the rule formal. Your toolkit's founder-boundaries file includes a no-take-backs pledge — a few sentences you sign, dated, ideally where an owner can see you do it. It reads like theater and works like structure: when the day-12 wobble hits and your hands start moving, a promise you made to a specific person on a specific date has a grip that a principle you agreed with in a book does not. Founders keep pledges they've witnessed themselves making. Sign it, tell your owners you signed it, and let them hold the receipt.

> **SAY THIS WHEN THE WORK COMES BACK WRONG**
>
> *"Okay — walk me through what happened. … Got it. So the package I gave you never actually said the confirmation has to go out before noon on kickoff day, or why that timing matters to the client. That's a gap in the handoff, and that's mine. I'm adding it now — the trigger and the why. This one's still yours: fix it with the client today, and tell me at Friday's review how it landed."*

Read what that script does. No rescue — the owner still fixes it. No blame — the package takes the hit. And one honest admission that keeps the whole thing human. That combination is what makes owners get better instead of gun-shy.

A quick diagnostic habit that makes the rule practical: when something comes back wrong, name the layer before you name anything else. Wrong result? The What was fuzzy — no real definition of done. Right work, wrong moment? The When never transferred; the trigger was still living in your pattern recognition. Technically fine but off somehow? The Standard shipped without examples of great and unacceptable side by side. A call you'd never have made? The Judgment layer — what they decide alone, what escalates — was missing its gray-area guidance. Tone that made you wince on a client thread? That's the Voice. Five seconds of layer-naming turns frustration into a fix you can actually make, and it keeps the conversation about the package, where it belongs.

3 HOLD THE WEEKLY FIRE REVIEW — 15 MINUTES, FOUR QUESTIONS

For the first month, meet weekly with your owners. Fifteen minutes, hard stop, same four questions: How many fires reached me this week, and which ones? What wobbled, and which handoff layer was missing? Which boundary or rule needs adjusting — in writing, today? What does each owner need before next week? After four weeks, if the counts are trending right, drop to monthly with the same agenda. The review is also where the boundary tables stay alive — every gray area that surfaced gets ruled on and added, so the documents keep pace with reality.

Keeping it to fifteen minutes is a discipline, not a suggestion, and it takes two habits. First, the count comes in written before the meeting — owners bring their numbers; the meeting is for what the numbers mean, not for compiling them. Second, no problem-solving in the room. The review identifies the wobble and names the missing layer; the actual package repair is a task with an owner and a date, done after. The first time a review balloons into a 50-minute working session, it stops being a review and starts being a meeting people dread — and dreaded meetings get skipped, and skipped reviews are how installations rot politely.

4 COUNT THE ONLY NUMBER THAT MATTERS

You installed this to stop being the landing pad, so measure exactly that: how many fires reached you this week versus last. Not how many fires happened — fires happening is business as usual, and your team handling them without you is the whole point. A simple tracker row per week does it:

WEEK	FIRES THAT REACHED ME	WHICH FIRES	OWNER ACTION TAKEN
Week 1	9	Approvals ×5, rework ×3, handoff ×1	Boundary table gap fixed; two redirects
Week 2	5	Approvals ×2, rework ×3	Standard examples added to package
Week 3	2	One real escalation, one habit DM	Redirect delivered; escalation was correct

Falling counts are the proof this worked — your own receipts, not a feeling. And look at week three: one of those two was a *correct* escalation. The goal was never zero. The goal is that what reaches you belongs with you.

Two secondary signals are worth a glance while you're counting. Time-to-resolution: are fires getting handled faster now that they don't queue behind your calendar? They should be, and that number is worth saying out loud to the team, because it reframes the whole change as a speed upgrade rather than a founder-comfort project. And escalation quality: of the things that did reach you, how many were correct calls versus habit? Correct escalations trending toward 100% of a small number is the graduation certificate. Habit escalations trending toward zero is the diploma frame.

5 KNOW THE RELIGHT PROTOCOL

If a fire genuinely comes back — counts climbing for two straight weeks, old patterns reappearing — don't start over and don't panic. Diagnose which of the five installation pieces failed: Did ownership actually transfer, or did you keep intercepting? Are the boundaries written, or still verbal? Did the escalation rules get published, or discussed? Was the change communicated, or mentioned? Did you take something back? It's nearly always one piece, not five. Re-run that chapter, tell the team plainly that you're tightening it, and keep the review cadence weekly until the count drops again.

WHAT THIRTY DAYS ACTUALLY LOOKS LIKE

So you can recognize normal when you're living it, here's a composite month — stitched from real installations, no names, the usual weather.

Days one through five feel great and mean little. Everyone's on best behavior; the memo is fresh; questions route correctly because the meeting was Tuesday. Enjoy it, and don't bank on it.

Days six through twelve are the honesty window. The first wobble lands — a missed trigger, a call you'd have made differently — and the first habit DMs arrive from your most senior person, who skipped the memo on the theory that memos are for other people. This is redirect season, and it's also when your own hands itch worst. The installation is not failing. It's being tested by people who'd rather not learn a new route, one of whom is you.

Days thirteen through twenty-one are quieter than feels right — you'll wonder if problems are hiding. Hold the review cadence and trust the counts over your gut; your gut was trained on the old wiring, and silence used to mean trouble. It doesn't anymore.

Days twenty-two through thirty are when it stops being a project. An owner amends her own boundary table without asking. A client emails Maya directly instead of cc'ing you. Somebody redirects somebody *else* to the escalation map, and you weren't in the conversation at all. That last one is the sound of an installation becoming a culture. Write the week-four numbers next to the week-one numbers and let yourself feel it.

WHEN TO LOOSEN THE GRIP

Holding for 30 days is the assignment. Holding forever at week-one tightness is its own kind of dependency — a founder white-knuckling a structure instead of white-knuckling the work is still white-knuckling.

Somewhere past the first month, the structure should start relaxing on evidence. Thresholds that never get approached move up. Signals that never fire get reviewed — some were insurance worth keeping, some were your anxiety in table form, and your owners can tell you which. The weekly review goes monthly. Owners start proposing boundary changes instead of waiting for them, which is the single best sign the installation took: the structure has become theirs to improve, not yours to enforce.

What never relaxes: single ownership, the written-ness of everything, and the no-take-backs rule. Those aren't training wheels. Those are the bike.

YOUR JOB WHILE THE STRUCTURE HOLDS

One last thing about the 30 days, because it trips up more founders than the wobbles do: you need somewhere for your attention to go.

Firefighting was your job. Not officially — officially you were the CEO — but hour by hour, the fires were what your days were made of, and a day structured around interruptions feels productive in a way an open calendar doesn't. When the interruptions stop, plenty of founders feel weirdly useless around week two, and useless founders go looking for something to check on. That's how installations get loved to death.

So decide in advance what the reclaimed hours are for, and put it on the calendar before rollout week: the offer you've been meaning to build, the partnerships you never had time to pursue, the strategy work that kept losing to whatever was on fire. Give your attention a forwarding address. An idle founder hovers; a redirected founder builds. Your team can tell the difference from across the room, and honestly, so can you.

FIRE WATCH

Beware the quiet week. Somewhere around week three, your inbox goes still, and it will feel wrong — you'll be tempted to check in, hover in the channel, "just peek" at the client thread. That checking is taking-it-back in soft clothes, and your team can smell it. The silence isn't neglect. The silence is the structure holding. Let it hold, and spend the hours on the work that actually needs a founder.

IN YOUR TOOLKIT

09-implementation-checklist.md is the full 30-day install sequence — Week 1, Week 2, Weeks 3–4 — as checkboxes mapped to these chapters. **10-follow-up-review.md** holds the 15-minute weekly review agenda, the fire count tracker table, the monthly review questions, and the relight protocol. Print the tracker. Numbers you can see beat numbers you remember.

★ FIRE MARSHAL'S NOTE

Tell one peer founder about your no-take-backs pledge, and give them standing permission to ask for your fire counts a month from now. External accountability is embarrassingly effective on people who are used to being the accountability — and a friend who asks "so what was week four's number?" will keep your hands in your pockets on a night the pledge alone wouldn't.

Take it back once, and everyone learns the new rules were a season.

FOUNDER FIRE CODES™

6 THE TOOLKIT, FILE BY FILE

Ten editable files came with this guide. Here's the whole kit on one map — what each file does and the moment you'll reach for it.

A note before the table: these are working documents, not worksheets. A worksheet gets filled in once and filed. These files are meant to live where your team works, get edited at reviews, and look dog-eared in six months. If a tool still says "FILL" anywhere in week three, that's an installation gap wearing a highlighter.

The kit also scales past this guide. Every file works for the four advanced fires exactly as written — the Trust Trap gets a row on the ownership roster, the Revenue Drop-Off gets escalation signals, the Accountability Vacuum leans hard on the operating principles, and the No-Backup-Plan Breakdown practically *is* file 02 applied to your tools and access. When a brand-new fire shows up next year, file 01 turns it into a playbook and files 02 through 10 install it. You're not buying ten documents; you're buying the install pattern.

FILE	WHAT IT DOES	WHEN TO USE IT
01-fire-playbook-template.md	The blank master playbook — every section of the fire anatomy as fill-in structure, from the fire's name and tells through response steps, prevention, and proof	Whenever you customize a playbook to your business, or build one for a fire the nine don't cover
02-ownership-backup-assignment.md	The per-fire roster: owner, backup, authority granted, start date — plus the owner-selection criteria	Chapter 1, before anything else gets installed
03-decision-authority-guidelines.md	Role-by-role decision rights, spend and client-risk thresholds, and operating principles with examples	Chapter 2, filled in with each owner in the room
04-escalation-rules.md	The signal → who → how fast map, per-fire signal examples, the never-escalate list, and the escalation message script	Chapter 3, alongside the boundaries

FILE	WHAT IT DOES	WHEN TO USE IT
05-founder-involvement-boundaries.md	Your short list of what still routes to you, the standing rule, an office-hours pattern, the no-take-backs pledge, and an exceptions log	Chapter 3 — and re-read it any week you feel your hands drifting back in
06-team-rollout-script.md	The rollout meeting: agenda, word-for-word opening, answers to the questions your team is actually thinking, and the one-week follow-up	Chapter 4, the week you announce
07-internal-communication-templates.md	Ready-to-send internal messages: ownership announcement, boundary memo, escalation memo, review invite, 30-day check-in	Chapter 4, same day as the meeting
08-client-communication-templates.md	Client-facing language: the expert introduction, the transition email, the “can I just work with you?” response, and new-channel setup	Chapter 4, before any client touchpoint changes
09-implementation-checklist.md	The full install sequence as checkboxes: Week 1, Week 2, Weeks 3–4	Chapter 5, from rollout day through day 30
10-follow-up-review.md	The weekly 15-minute fire review agenda, the fire count tracker, monthly review questions, and the relight protocol	Chapter 5, every week for a month — then monthly, forever

Suggested order of operations, if you want it spelled out: 02, then 03, then 04 and 05 together, then 06 through 08 in rollout week, then 09 and 10 carry you through the month. File 01 floats — reach for it whenever a fire needs its playbook written or rewritten.

MAKING THE FILES YOURS

The files ship as plain markdown on purpose — they open in anything, paste into everything, and nothing about them locks you into a tool. Move them into wherever your team actually lives: Notion, Google Docs, ClickUp, the wiki. The scripts are written in my register; before you send any of them, read them out loud once and swap in the words you’d actually say. A script that doesn’t sound like you reads like a hostage note, and your team will clock it in one sentence.

Every FILL line in the files is a decision, not a blank. If a FILL is hard to complete, that's the tool telling you a decision hasn't been made yet — go make it, then come back. And date the top of each file when you finish it. Six months from now, "last updated" is how you'll know whether these are living documents or whether the installation needs a booster shot.

FIRE WATCH

Resist the urge to fill all ten files in one ambitious Saturday. The files are quick; the decisions inside them are not, and decisions made in bulk get remade in dribbles. Follow the chapters. Two weeks of deliberate installation beats one weekend of paperwork that nobody, including you, ends up honoring.

THIRTY DAYS FROM NOW

Let me tell you what a business feels like a month after a real installation, because it's quieter than you're expecting — and the quiet takes some getting used to.

Your phone sits still for stretches you don't trust yet. Questions that used to form a line outside your inbox get answered by a table your ops lead updates without telling you. A client wobble happens on a Tuesday, and you hear about it Friday — in the review, past tense, already handled, with a note about which layer of the package got strengthened because of it.

The fires didn't stop. Business is business; something will always catch a spark. What stopped is the routing. Fires burn out in the hands of the people closest to them now, and the only smoke that reaches you is the kind that genuinely needs a founder — which turns out to be a short list, just like you wrote.

Your team feels different too, in a way that's hard to attribute until you know what you're looking at. Maya talks about onboarding like it's hers, because it is. The escalations that reach you arrive composed — facts, actions taken, one clear ask — from people who used to open with "sorry to bother you." Nobody apologizes for deciding things anymore. You built that with a roster, three tables, one meeting, and four weeks of keeping your hands in your pockets.

And you'll notice something else: you have attention again. Whole afternoons of it. The strategy work, the offer development, the relationships only you can build — the actual founder job gets your best hours instead of your leftovers. That's not a bonus of the installation. That was always the point of it.

Somewhere down the road, a fire will show up that isn't one of the nine — and when it does, The AI Fire Codes for Founders will show you how to build a full playbook for it yourself, on demand.

For now: pick your worst fire, open the roster, and put a name in the owner column. Everything else in this guide follows from that one move.

Go get your afternoons back.

TIFFANY LOPEZ

BUSINESS SYSTEMS ARCHITECT · LUXE BUSINESS BACKEND™