Participants Guide

Introduction to the Founder's Challenge

Research demonstrates that founder leadership quality is a significant predictor of early-stage success. Traits like openness, resilience, and adaptability are strongly linked to sustainable growth and resilience. However, while values are foundational, understanding our *leadership style*—both strengths and limitations—is crucial to improving organizational outcomes.

Often, founders face barriers to self-assessment because people around them (employees, investors, partners) may have incentives to withhold critical feedback. This workshop provides tools to help founders reflect on their leadership strengths and potential blind spots, setting the stage for personal and organizational growth.

Self-Assessment: Identifying Leadership Strengths and Blind Spots

Instructions

Complete the following questions by rating yourself on a scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). This will help you understand how certain strengths and potential blind spots influence your leadership style.

Scale

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

Self-Assessment Questions

1. When I encounter a new idea, I feel excited and open to exploring it fully.
2. I actively seek perspectives from people who think differently than I do.
3. I'm comfortable making significant changes and exploring all options before deciding.
4. I regularly try unconventional solutions when faced with challenges outside my comfort zone.
5. I frequently encourage my team to challenge or improve upon existing ideas or practices.
6. I organize complex projects with a clear method and use tools to stay on track.
7. I follow through on tasks, even when they seem less critical or rewarding.

8. I rely on careful planning over gut feeling for decision-making, especially in high-stakes situations.
9. When managing multiple responsibilities, I consistently prioritize and ensure progress.
10. I set specific, measurable goals for myself and my team, and I review progress regularly.
11. After setbacks, I recover emotionally and quickly refocus on solutions.
12. I take steps to manage stress constructively, seeking support when needed.
13. I respond empathetically when a team member makes a significant error.
14. When things don't go as planned, I manage my emotions and stay positive.
15. After a tough week, I have a routine for resetting and preparing for the next challenge.
16. In disagreements with team members, I handle differences with understanding and respect.
17. When making decisions, I consider the impact on my team's morale and motivation.
18. I am open to personal issues that may affect my team members' work.
19. I regularly invite and welcome constructive feedback from my team.
20. During high-stress situations, I maintain a collaborative and empathetic approach.
21. When I encounter a skill gap in myself, I actively work to learn and improve.
22. I view failures as opportunities for growth and improvement.
23. I regularly seek out new skills or knowledge, even outside my current expertise.
24. I reflect on challenging experiences and apply the lessons I learn.
25. When a team member fails, I focus on their growth and offer support rather than criticism.
26. I often consult others before making significant decisions.
27. I encourage my team to challenge my ideas and assumptions.
28. Even when confident in a plan, I seek out feedback and consider alternative perspectives.
29. I recognize the contributions of my team and external factors to our success.
30. I regularly perform a "reality check" on my goals to ensure they're grounded and realistic.
31. When I delegate tasks, I feel comfortable giving full responsibility to my team.
32. I support team members in correcting their mistakes instead of taking over.
33. I feel confident in my team's abilities without the need to frequently check in.
34. I trust my team's approach, even if it's different from how I would handle a task.
35. I rarely re-do work initially assigned to a team member because I believe they can handle it well.
36. I adapt quickly to unexpected changes in market conditions.
37. I frequently reassess business strategies and pivot when needed.
38. I carefully consider new ideas from team members, even if they differ from my own approach.
39. I remain open when someone suggests a change to my strategy.
40. I welcome feedback, especially when it suggests that my approach could be improved.
41. I often delegate challenging work and encourage my team to take on responsibility.
42. I feel comfortable letting go of certain tasks, trusting my team to handle them.
43. I share responsibilities evenly and ensure the workload is manageable.
44. I avoid burnout by balancing delegation with my responsibilities.

45. I encourage my team to take ownership of projects, offering support rather than taking over.
46. I am receptive to feedback, even when it’s difficult to hear.
47. I regularly ask for constructive criticism from those I manage to improve my performance.
48. I handle disagreements with an open mind, avoiding defensiveness.
49. I review my role in unsuccessful projects rather than focusing solely on external factors.
50. When a project doesn’t go as planned, I seek out feedback on how I might improve.

Scoring

Self-Grading and Reflection

Total Score: Calculate your overall score by adding up your responses.

Average Score per Category:

1. Positive Traits (Strengths)
   - Openness to Experience (Questions 1–5): __________
   - Conscientiousness (Questions 6–10): __________
   - Emotional Resilience (Questions 11–15): __________
   - Agreeableness (Questions 16–20): __________
   - Growth Mindset (Questions 21–25): __________
2. Potential Blind Spots (Traps)
   - Overconfidence (Questions 26–30): __________
   - Micromanagement (Questions 31–35): __________
   - Inflexibility (Questions 36–40): __________
   - Hero Complex (Questions 41–45): __________
   - Difficulty Accepting Criticism (Questions 46–50): __________

Reflect on each section where you scored particularly high or low. Identify any traits you may want to reinforce and any blind spots that could benefit from greater self-awareness and action.

Explanation of Positive Traits and Potential Blind Spots

Positive Traits and Why They Matter

1. **Openness to Experience**
   - **Why it Matters**: Founders who are open to new ideas can adapt to market changes and foster an innovative culture.

- **Reflection**: How willing are you to try new approaches or explore feedback from diverse sources?

2. **Conscientiousness**
   - **Why it Matters**: Conscientious founders bring structure and accountability, which helps in goal-setting and reliable execution.
   - **Reflection**: How does your planning and follow-through affect your team's productivity?
3. **Emotional Resilience**
   - **Why it Matters**: Leaders who recover quickly from setbacks set a tone of stability and focus, even in challenging times.
   - **Reflection**: How do you manage stress, and how does this impact your team's confidence?
4. **Agreeableness**
   - **Why it Matters**: Empathetic, collaborative leaders build strong, trust-based relationships, enhancing team morale and loyalty.
   - **Reflection**: How often do you seek input from others, especially in high-stakes situations?
5. **Growth Mindset**
   - **Why it Matters**: A growth mindset helps founders see challenges as opportunities, fostering continuous learning.
   - **Reflection**: How do you handle setbacks? Are they seen as barriers or learning moments?

Potential Blind Spots and Why They Matter

1. **Overconfidence**
   - **Why it Matters**: Founders who are overly confident may ignore feedback, increasing risk by implementing untested strategies.
   - **Reflection**: How open are you to changing direction based on team or market feedback?
2. **Micromanagement**
   - **Why it Matters**: Micromanaging can limit team autonomy, hinder innovation, and lead to founder burnout.
   - **Reflection**: How often do you find yourself re-doing tasks your team members have completed?
3. **Inflexibility**
   - **Why it Matters**: An unwillingness to pivot in response to market demands can leave the company vulnerable in dynamic environments.
   - **Reflection**: How frequently do you reassess your strategies and adapt to feedback or external factors?
4. **Hero Complex**

- **Why it Matters**: Founders who try to “do it all” may limit team growth and increase their own risk of burnout.
- **Reflection**: How often do you take on work that could be delegated, and what prevents you from letting go?

5. **Difficulty Accepting Criticism**
    - **Why it Matters**: Leaders who resist feedback may miss insights that could improve their effectiveness and team dynamics.
    - **Reflection**: How do you respond to constructive criticism, and how does this affect your team’s willingness to speak openly?

Vertical Leadership

Introduction to the Vertical Leadership Model for Founders

In the fast-paced and often uncertain world of startups, effective leadership is about more than skills and experience; it's about developing the internal capacity to handle complexity, make sound decisions under pressure, and grow alongside your company. This is where the **Vertical Leadership Model** becomes valuable.

The Vertical Leadership Model, as explored in leadership research by developmental psychologists such as Robert Kegan and organizations like McKinsey, suggests that leaders can grow through progressive stages. At each stage, leaders expand their mental frameworks and become more adaptable, self-aware, and capable of leading through complex situations(Core Values Mini-Facili…).

Why Vertical Leadership for Founders? Traditional leadership development, often called *horizontal development*, focuses on acquiring skills or knowledge—what you *know*. In contrast, *vertical development* is about expanding *how you think*, especially in relation to handling ambiguity, managing complexity, and aligning deeply with your values. For founders, who face high-stakes challenges regularly, vertical development can be the difference between feeling stuck in reactive problem-solving and leading with vision and adaptability.

A study by McKinsey points out that vertical development is essential for leaders who must navigate environments of constant change, where technical skills alone won't suffice(Core Values Mini-Facili…). Founders often embody both positive traits and blind spots, and the Vertical Leadership Model provides a pathway to leverage strengths and overcome limitations by advancing their internal development.

Key Principles of the Vertical Leadership Model in this Exercise

1. **Self-Awareness and Reflection**
   Vertical development starts with self-awareness. This exercise helps you recognize your strengths (like resilience and openness) and potential traps (like overconfidence or micromanagement). By identifying these, you can reflect on how they affect your leadership and adjust accordingly.
2. **Complexity-Handling**
   As you move through the stages, your ability to handle complexity increases. This means instead of viewing challenges as black-and-white, you begin to see nuances and multiple perspectives. For example, if you're naturally a visionary founder, the model can help you see when to balance your enthusiasm for new ideas with grounded execution from your team.
3. **Alignment with Core Values**
   A cornerstone of the Vertical Leadership Model is that growth happens most effectively when it's anchored in personal values. This exercise started with identifying your values, helping you stay grounded in what's most meaningful, especially during high-stakes

situations. Founders who are anchored in their values can lead consistently and authentically, even under pressure.

4. **Moving from Expert to Coach**
   Vertical development encourages a shift from being the “hero” who handles everything to a “coach” who empowers the team. This is particularly relevant for founders who tend to micromanage or feel indispensable. As a coach, you delegate and foster autonomy, enabling your team to grow and freeing yourself to focus on strategy and vision.
5. **Embracing Feedback and Adaptability**
   In the more advanced stages, leaders welcome feedback and seek diverse perspectives. For founders, this means embracing feedback not as criticism but as an opportunity to improve. Research from Harvard suggests that founders who foster a feedback-rich culture build more resilient organizations(Core Values Mini-Facili…).

How to Use Vertical Development to Improve as a Founder

Using the Vertical Leadership Model, you can set goals that align with both your current strengths and your areas for growth:

- **Reflect Regularly**: Practice weekly or monthly self-reflection to check in on your values, reactions, and leadership style.
- **Seek Feedback**: Create a culture where feedback is encouraged and accepted. Use insights from your team to uncover blind spots.
- **Practice Seeing Complexity**: When faced with decisions, ask yourself, “What are the alternative perspectives?” or “How might someone else approach this?” Expanding your perspective enables better, more balanced decision-making.
- **Balance Strengths and Blind Spots**: Recognize where a strength could turn into a blind spot if over-relied upon (e.g., resilience turning into rigidity) and work on moderation.

The Vertical Leadership Model is not a quick fix but a gradual development process. For founders, it represents a powerful framework to grow not only in skills but in the ability to think broadly, adapt quickly, and lead authentically. By using this model as a guide, you can build a resilient foundation for yourself and your organization, empowering you to lead with clarity, flexibility, and confidence.

Step	Reflection/Exercise
1. Identify Growth Areas	Based on your assessment, select one strength to develop further and one blind spot to address.
2. Reflect on Current Stage	Consider challenges in managing complexity or delegation. Which positive traits do you rely on too heavily, and where are blind spots impacting your decisions?
3. Set an Improvement Goal	Define a goal for each area (strength and trap). Example: “Delegate one key responsibility each month to reduce micromanagement.”
4. Define an Accountability Partner	Identify a trusted peer or mentor who can provide feedback and support as you work toward your goals.
5. Create a Regular Reflection Practice	Choose a weekly or monthly time to check in on your progress. Example: “Reflect each Friday on how well I allowed team autonomy on projects.”

Growth Areas

Current Stage

Improvement Goal

Accountability Partner

Reflection Practice

Action Plan

Leadership Style Action Plan

1. Identify Growth Areas	Based on your assessment, select one strength to develop further and one blind spot to address.
2. Reflect on Current Stage	Consider challenges in managing complexity or delegation. Which positive traits do you rely on too heavily, and where are blind spots impacting your decisions?
3. Set an Improvement Goal	Define a goal for each area (strength and trap). Example: “Delegate one key responsibility each month to reduce micromanagement.”
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Reflection Practice

Growth Areas

Current Stage

Improvement Goal

Accountability Partner

Facilitator's Guide

Facilitator’s Guide for Leading the Workshop

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1. Introduction

- **Set the Stage**: Begin by explaining the foundational research on the impact of founder quality on early-stage company success. Emphasize that founders with certain positive traits—like openness, resilience, and adaptability—are more likely to lead successful, scalable organizations.
- **Importance of Leadership Style**: Explain that understanding our own leadership style is essential. While we’ve established core values, our leadership style—how we act and make decisions—can either strengthen or hinder our success.

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2. Discuss Barriers to Honest Feedback

- **Explain the Feedback Challenge**: Many people around a founder (employees, investors, partners) may not feel comfortable providing honest feedback about their leadership style. Employees might fear repercussions, investors may prioritize the relationship, and partners may want to avoid tension. Highlight that this workshop is an opportunity to start with self-reflection and gain insight into areas for growth.

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3. Introduce the Self-Assessment

- **Instructions**: Distribute the self-assessment and explain the scoring scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Encourage participants to answer as honestly as possible, reflecting on recent behaviors and experiences.

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4. Review Positive Traits and Blind Spots

After participants complete the assessment, review each trait and potential blind spot with context on high and low scores.

Positive Traits (Strengths)

1. **Openness to Experience**
    - **High Score (4–5)**: Indicates a strong willingness to adapt, innovate, and embrace new ideas. Founders with high openness can drive change and foster an environment that values learning and exploration.
    - **Low Score (1–2)**: May indicate reluctance to change or explore new ideas. This could lead to missed opportunities, a stagnant culture, and difficulty adapting to market shifts.
    - **Lesson**: Embracing openness encourages adaptability, a critical skill in dynamic markets. However, it's also essential to balance openness with focus, ensuring new ideas are practical and aligned with strategic goals.
2. **Conscientiousness**
    - **High Score (4–5)**: Reflects strong organization, reliability, and attention to detail. High conscientiousness enhances trust and accountability within the team, as well as consistent performance.
    - **Low Score (1–2)**: Suggests potential issues with follow-through or planning, which could result in operational inefficiencies and reduced team confidence.
    - **Lesson**: Conscientiousness fosters dependable leadership. Leaders should aim to balance their focus on structure with adaptability, allowing room for team creativity and innovation.
3. **Emotional Resilience**
    - **High Score (4–5)**: Signifies strong coping mechanisms and the ability to remain calm under pressure. Emotionally resilient founders maintain a stable presence, which can reassure their team during challenging times.
    - **Low Score (1–2)**: May indicate a tendency to be overwhelmed by stress, leading to burnout and decreased morale. Low resilience could affect decision-making and create a less stable work environment.
    - **Lesson**: Emotional resilience supports consistency and builds team confidence. Founders should prioritize stress management techniques to maintain resilience and avoid burnout.
4. **Agreeableness**
    - **High Score (4–5)**: Reflects empathy, collaboration, and a supportive leadership approach. High agreeableness often correlates with strong team cohesion and morale.
    - **Low Score (1–2)**: May suggest challenges in empathizing with others or maintaining positive team dynamics. This can lead to disengagement and may impact team retention and morale.
    - **Lesson**: Agreeableness fosters trust and strong relationships. Leaders should balance agreeableness with assertiveness, ensuring they can make tough decisions when needed.
5. **Growth Mindset**
    - **High Score (4–5)**: Indicates an openness to learning and continuous improvement. Founders with a growth mindset are likely to adapt well, view challenges constructively, and encourage development within their teams.

- **Low Score (1–2)**: May indicate a tendency to view challenges as setbacks rather than learning opportunities, which can lead to risk aversion and hinder long-term growth.
- **Lesson**: A growth mindset enables continuous development and adaptability. Founders should create a learning culture within their organizations, modeling resilience and encouraging team growth.

Potential Blind Spots (Traps)

1. **Overconfidence**
    - **High Score (4–5)**: Indicates strong self-assurance, but unchecked, it can lead to disregarding input or ignoring potential risks. High overconfidence can result in impulsive decision-making.
    - **Low Score (1–2)**: Reflects a more cautious approach, which can prevent hasty decisions but may also lead to self-doubt or indecision.
    - **Lesson**: Overconfidence needs to be balanced with openness to feedback. Founders should regularly check their assumptions and involve their team in decision-making.
2. **Micromanagement**
    - **High Score (4–5)**: Suggests a tendency to control aspects of the team's work, limiting autonomy and potentially creating dependency. This can lead to team frustration and hinder growth.
    - **Low Score (1–2)**: Indicates a high level of trust and delegation, though very low scores might suggest a lack of oversight, potentially compromising accountability.
    - **Lesson**: Effective delegation fosters team growth and prevents founder burnout. Founders should trust their team's abilities while providing guidance when needed.
3. **Inflexibility**
    - **High Score (4–5)**: Indicates a strong preference for maintaining established strategies, which can hinder adaptation in changing markets. High inflexibility may lead to missed opportunities.
    - **Low Score (1–2)**: Reflects openness to change, though very low scores might suggest a tendency to pivot too frequently, impacting focus and direction.
    - **Lesson**: Inflexibility should be balanced with openness to new ideas. Founders should evaluate when to adapt their strategies based on market signals.
4. **Hero Complex**
    - **High Score (4–5)**: Indicates a tendency to take on all responsibilities, which can lead to burnout and restrict team growth. Founders with a hero complex may struggle with delegation.
    - **Low Score (1–2)**: Suggests a willingness to delegate, though extremely low scores may indicate a lack of engagement in critical aspects of the business.

- ○ **Lesson**: Founders should recognize the importance of empowering their team. Delegating critical tasks enables others to grow and allows founders to focus on strategic priorities.

5. **Difficulty Accepting Criticism**
   - ○ **High Score (4–5)**: Suggests a tendency to resist feedback, potentially missing opportunities for improvement. High defensiveness may stifle team communication and limit growth.
   - ○ **Low Score (1–2)**: Reflects openness to feedback, though very low scores may indicate a tendency to be overly self-critical, which could reduce confidence.
   - ○ **Lesson**: Openness to constructive criticism fosters self-improvement. Founders should view feedback as a valuable tool for growth and encourage a culture of transparent communication.

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5. Introduce the Vertical Leadership Model

- **Model Overview**: Explain how the Vertical Leadership Model emphasizes internal development and the ability to handle complexity. Highlight the importance of moving from a directive (horizontal) style to an adaptive (vertical) style that encourages reflection, feedback, and a growth mindset.
- **Research**: Share insights from Robert Kegan and McKinsey, which indicate that vertical development is particularly beneficial for leaders in high-change environments(Core Values Mini-Facili…)(Core Values Mini-Facili…).

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6. Guide the Vertical Leadership Action Plan

Distribute the Vertical Leadership Action Plan worksheet. Walk through each step, giving participants time to reflect and set goals.

Step	Reflection/Exercise
1. Identify Growth Areas	Choose one strength to enhance and one blind spot to address based on your assessment.

2. Reflect on Current Stage	Consider which strengths you rely on most and how they influence your decisions. Evaluate where blind spots may be limiting growth.
3. Set an Improvement Goal	Define a goal for each area (e.g., "Delegate one key task each month to address micromanagement tendencies").
4. Define an Accountability Partner	Choose a mentor, peer, or team member to support your goals.
5. Create a Regular Reflection Practice	Schedule weekly or monthly check-ins to review progress. Example: "Reflect each Friday on how well I allowed team autonomy on projects."

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7. Encourage Sharing and Accountability

Encourage participants to pair up and discuss their action plan with a peer if they feel comfortable. This fosters accountability and allows for valuable insights through shared experiences.

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8. Closing Reflection and Commitment

Conclude by inviting each participant to share a key takeaway and their main action step moving forward. Emphasize that vertical leadership development is an ongoing process that will support both personal growth and company success.

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