The Scaling Founder

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The Scaling Founder

A JOURNEY OF INCOMPETENCE

BRETT MATHESON

Metavolve
Build The Future. Enjoy The Ride.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I've been blessed with an incredible client base and network. This book carries the fingerprints of a lot of them.

When I released the MVP version, 200 founders received it and gave me feedback. Thank you to every one of you who read it and told me the truth about it. This version exists because you did. A few people went further than I had any right to expect.

Harley Ferguson went through it line by line, built a Notion board with feedback, and we had a 90-minute promenade walk to talk the whole thing through. That conversation took the book from 17,000 words to 37,000. An immense contribution.

James Moore, my editor and the author of *ExplAIn Yourself*. What an honour to work with you on this. The standard you hold raised the standard of the book, and the difference is on every page.

Cameron Coutts, my co-founder at Metavolve. So many of the stories and lessons here come out of the work we've done side by side. Thank you!

Nic Frangos, my business advisor and the source of the All-In Strategy method that everything I do is built on. Thank you for the thinking and for sharing it.

To my future family. You inspire me to take on hard things and build toward a better life, before I've even met you.

INTRO

I genuinely believe I was put on this earth to guide business owners through transitions. And I love what I do.

Meeting different founders. Working on different businesses at different stages. I'll go through a day of meetings and come out of it feeling fulfilled by the amazing people that I've interacted with.

But there's one day above all that sticks out in my mind. This day was great on paper, yet I left it frustrated.

Three founders. Three businesses. Three good conversations.

It took me a while to see it, but eventually I realised I'd had the same conversation three times.

The surface details were different – different industries, different stages, different specific problems. But underneath, what each founder was wrestling with was almost identical. And each of them had described it as if no one else in the world could possibly understand.

They felt entirely alone.

If you're reading this, there's a good chance you've felt it too. The sense that you should be further along than you are. That what you used to be good at no longer seems to be working. That everyone else has figured out something you've missed.

But you haven't missed anything. You're in a transition, and this is how transitions feel.

That's where this book comes in.

Over the last decade, I've had thousands of conversations like the three I had that day. Across hundreds of businesses in more than twenty countries. Across industries that have nothing in common except a founder trying to grow something.

On top of that, I'm also a founder myself. And have lived through the inherent challenges of building and scaling my own businesses, working through relationships with co-founders, clients, staff, suppliers, and investors as we grow.

The thing is, almost every founder believes their situation is uniquely theirs. And in the details, it is. But the questions they're asking, the struggles they're facing, and the answers they're avoiding, are almost always the same.

What you're carrying isn't a personal failure. It's a stage of the journey almost every founder moves through, usually without knowing that's what's happening.

This book is here to make that visible. To be a companion in your growth.

To give you the patterns, so you can recognise yourself in them. The language, so you can name what you're going through. And the company of founders who have stood exactly where you're standing, and kept building anyway.

What you're experiencing isn't your fault. But that doesn't mean it isn't your responsibility.

Some of what you read will hit hard. You'll come to realisations about yourself, your team, and your business that you've been avoiding for a while. And that's the point. Those realisations are what help you break through the ceiling you're sitting under.

So, read this book knowing it comes from a place of wanting you to succeed. And not for your benefit alone, but because of what grows around a founder who breaks through. The people in your business grow with you. The community around it gets stronger. The ripple travels further than you realise.

My belief is that somewhere in these pages, one of the stories, frameworks or concepts will give you language for an experience you haven't yet named, so that when you put the book down, you'll feel less alone, clearer, and excited to keep building.

A NOTE ON HOW THE BOOK IS STRUCTURED

The chapters are organised into four parts, in the order most founders move through them:

Growth: The work of building something that grows beyond you.

Altitude: The shift in how you operate as you scale.

Direction: Where you're taking it, and why.

Ego: Getting out of your own way.

Alongside the book is a companion app with a set of reflection questions for each chapter – designed to surface what's already in your head and turn it into your next move.

You'll find it at **www.thescalingfounder.com**.

To get the most out of this book, I recommend you log on and answer the questions at the end of each chapter.

> **Note**: Throughout this book, the term *Founder* is used as a catch-all reference for Founders, Business Owners, Managing Directors, and CEOs - anyone ultimately responsible for leading and shaping the business.

PART ONE
GROWTH

Scaling is hard. You know that already.

But it isn't always the work itself that's hard. It's that the rules change while you're still in motion. The problems get bigger. The pressure gets more personal. The decisions follow you home. The people around you carry costs nobody talks about. And the version of you that built the business starts running into the limits of what that version can hold.

This section is about that phase.

Not the strategy of growth – there are plenty of books for that – but the experience of being inside it. The confidence that was earned at the last stage but doesn't quite fit this one. The co-founder relationships that get stretched. The drive that built the business and may now be limiting it. The chaos that creeps in when you say yes faster than your organisation's structure can absorb it.

Every chapter in part 1 addresses the same underlying theme.

You are the asset the business is growing through. Most of the friction in this phase isn't the business breaking. It's you, meeting the edges of who you were when you started.

That isn't a problem to fix. It's the work itself.

Get each chapters reflection questions at
www.thescalingfounder.com/journal
or scan the below QR code.

ONE

PROBLEMS ARE AN EVOLUTIONARY FEATURE, NOT A BUG

"It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change."
– Charles Darwin

A mentor of mine once told me a story.

He was on stage with a few founders, taking questions from the audience. A woman put up her hand, slightly sheepishly, and asked something along these lines:

Once you've overcome all these problems, what does life look like on the other side?

The stage erupted in laughter. When they recovered, one of them looked at her and said:

The problems only get bigger. You think this is a big problem now? Wait three years. Add a few digits. That's the nature of growth.

It's not that the problems go away. It's that you become the kind of person who can hold them.

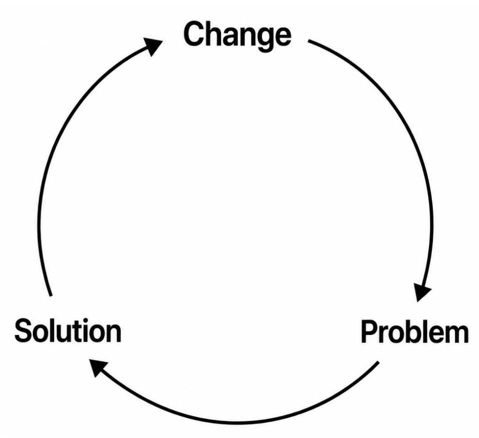
So why is being a founder so fucking difficult?

The answer is simple: change.

Change isn't something that happens to us. It's the condition we live in. And where there is change, there are decisions to be made.

Every decision you make puts you on a new path. And that creates a new reality – which brings a new set of consequences, questions, and problems.

That's the cycle we're all inside:



Solve one problem and you don't return to calm waters. You arrive at a new shoreline, with a different set of challenges waiting.

That isn't a flaw in the system. It is the system.

If change is permanent, problems are permanent too.

The Trap Of Solving The Wrong Problem

The thing is, most founders are excellent problem-solvers. That's how they got here.

The trap is that the better you are at solving problems, the faster you solve the wrong one.

You see a problem. You move. You fix it. The team admires the speed. The result looks good. Everyone exhales.

But six months later, the same problem shows up wearing different clothes.

You solve it again, slightly faster this time. Three months later, same thing. Then six weeks. Then it's just there, permanently. A recurring tax on your attention that you've stopped trying to name.

This is the part founders don't see until someone names it for them.

You're not failing to solve the problem. You're solving the wrong one.

The problem in front of you is almost always a symptom of a deeper one. The sales pipeline isn't really the issue. The offer is. The team isn't really the issue. What you're asking them to hold is. The cash flow isn't really the issue. The business model is.

Speed at solving the surface problem doesn't help. It just digs the hole faster.

Becoming A Victim Of Your Own Success

This is where most of my clients start when they come to me. Frustrated. Stuck. Convinced they're the problem.

When we unpack what's actually going on, the same thing shows up almost every time.

They've become a victim of their own success.

They built something. It worked. The thing that made it work, their instincts, their hustle, their ability to hold everything personally, got them here. And now that exact thing is what's in their way.

They can't see it because they're standing in it.

They've outgrown the version of themselves that built this, and they're trying to lead a new business with old reflexes.

But, when we hold the mirror up and they can see how far they've actually come, something shifts. They view their position through a whole new lens. And that's when the problem comes into focus. Now, they can become unstuck, and reignite the spark that got them where they are. The hunger. The determination switches on again.

That's where I watch founders change gear and take their business to the next level. They face up to the daunting realisation that they've signed up for the hardest job in the world, and step into that next phase with conviction. This process reminds me of a parable.

The Blacksmith And His Apprentice

A master blacksmith took on an apprentice. For weeks the apprentice just watched the master work. Every piece followed the same order. The iron went into the fire first. Only once it glowed did the master bring it to the anvil and start to hammer.

The apprentice found the fire tedious. Building it, feeding it, waiting for the metal to come up to heat, all of it before a single blow landed. It was gruelling and slow, and it stood between him and the work he wanted to be doing.

So one day he skipped the fire. He took the iron cold and worked it as it was. He had to work harder to shape the metal, but shape it he did. And he got good at it. Good enough that his pieces sat on the bench beside the master's and you couldn't tell whose was whose.

Then a customer came in, picked up one of the apprentice's pieces, and put it to work. Under the first proper use it snapped.

The master picked up the two halves and turned them over in his hands. Then he looked at his apprentice.

"Only iron forged in the fire holds under stress," he said. "The fire is what makes the metal able to take it. You gave this metal shape, but not resilience."

The hard stretches of scaling a business are the fire. The problems that won't resolve easily. The pressure that doesn't let up. The seasons where you're carrying more than you thought you could. Going through them is what forms you into someone who can lead a business at scale. There's no version where you skip the heat and arrive at the strength.

What you can do is learn to control the fire.

TWO

THIS IS FUCKING HARD

"Nobody likes change." – Ross from Friends

I've received calls from my clients' spouses asking to meet for coffee.

These have been some of the most uncomfortable conversations of my life.

The arc of those conversations goes something like this.

I keep hearing amazing things from my spouse. I can see they're excited again. I love that. But I'm worried about what it means for our family. Are we capable of stepping up to support them? Do we need to sacrifice even more so they can reach their dream?

What those coffees have shown me, again and again, is that there's a cost the founder isn't seeing. And it's being carried by someone else.

Scaling a business is an assault on every facet of your life.

When you start, you don't have the resources to build the business you've imagined in your head. You have an idea, some momentum, and the belief that you'll work it out as you go. So you make a plan, usually without naming it, to get through this phase.

You stretch yourself. You absorb the pressure. You borrow time, energy, and attention from wherever you can find it.

There's no roadmap. No clear sequence. No moment where someone steps in and says, this is the right move now. Even with frameworks, and there are many, you still make the decisions alone.

You're expected to fill multiple roles, often at the same time. Just as you find your footing in one, the business asks something different of you.

Most founders expect long hours. They expect pressure. They expect uncertainty.

What they don't expect is how totally all-encompassing it feels.

Decisions follow you home. Responsibility doesn't switch off. From the outside, things look fine. Inside, the cost is accumulating and it's hard to feel exactly where. Your body will tell you when you're burnt out, yet your mind will tell you to keep pushing.

That's a hard paradox to live with.

The Gap Between Vision And Capacity

The reason scaling feels like an assault isn't because something has gone wrong. It's because the business has moved beyond the resources you currently have.

You don't yet have the people you want. You can't yet afford the structure you need. So you make a plan with what's available.

That gap between vision and capacity is where the disruption lives.

It shows up first in your calendar and your attention. Then it reshapes how your time, energy, and focus are distributed across the business. Eventually it touches everything, including your personal life.

As you move deeper into leadership, the horizon you're responsible for expands. You're no longer thinking about today's work. You're holding next month, next quarter, next year in your head at the same time.

That kind of thinking carries weight. It's not something you can switch off easily. Even when you want to.

You can be physically with the people you care about and still feel elsewhere. There's often a low-level anxiety sitting just behind the conversation. Not quite a panic. Just a list of unfinishedness.

Most founders read this as a personal failing. A lack of discipline. An inability to switch off.

It isn't.

It's a sign that the scope of your responsibility has expanded faster than the personal systems supporting it.

The People Closest To You

While you're living it, the people closest to you are absorbing the version of you that's left over at the end of each day. The fragmented attention. The shorter fuse. The conversations you're physically present for but mentally elsewhere.

They didn't sign up for the business. They signed up for you.

Many founders try to protect their friends and family by keeping the business separate. The intention is good. The effect is usually more isolation.

The people around you are sacrificing alongside you, whether you've told them or not. Less time. Different kinds of time. Shorter windows. More fragmented attention.

But you can help them. And what helps here isn't detail. It's context.

Let the people closest to you know that you're in a season of growth. That it's going to be demanding. That it's disruptive in the short term. That you're working toward something longer term, even if it isn't fully visible yet.

You're inviting them into awareness and connection with you. You're starting to build the support structure you're going to need.

If you don't name it, they'll take it personally. If you don't account for it, it will tax everything around you.

Build The Village Before You Need It

I've personally seen my first marriage fall apart. Both of us were running our own businesses. Both of us were overwhelmed. Neither of us had the language or the bandwidth to talk to each other about what was actually happening.

I've also watched clients isolate themselves from their spouses and families as the business comes under more strain. Right at the moment they need the support most.

The pressure you're under as a founder is enormous. It's not normal for a human to carry. You already know that. You've already accepted it.

What I'm advocating for isn't a shift in how hard you work.

It's the vulnerability to build an authentic support structure, so that when the next round of disruption hits, you have people around you who can hold it with you.

It takes a village to scale something significant.

Your village is your spouse. Your co-founders. Your family. Your closest friends. Then it's your team. Your clients. Your suppliers. Your investors.

But there are alternatives most founders underestimate. Entrepreneurial communities for every stage of business. Mentors. Professional advisors. Coaches. Seminars. Podcasts. Peer groups.

The list is genuinely huge. Find what works for you and go to it.

What works for me is re-establishing my foundations.

My friends and family, seen deliberately, not in the gaps.

Something competitive with people who share camaraderie. That used to be golf. Now – like just about every other founder – it's padel.

Lifting heavy in the gym.

And food. I'm a massive foodie, and a good meal, well prepared, made with love, is one of the most grounding things I do.

Those are things I've always done, but over the last few years I've discovered the power of meditation – something I never thought I'd say.

Similar practices like body scanning and moment-to-moment awareness have given me a grounded presence that allows me to act from a place of conscious intention rather than reaction.

These are the foundations I go back to when things get hard. Yours will look different. The point isn't the list. The point is that you have one, and that you actually go to it.

Most founders don't.

Then they wonder why the disruption is taking so much out of them.

Your support structure and the people you surround yourself with decide whether you build the life you're aiming for, or whether the cost becomes irreversible before you notice.

You're probably doing it for them. Your partner. Your family. Your friends. Your people. That's true.

Just make sure the version of you they get back at the end of this is the version they were waiting for.