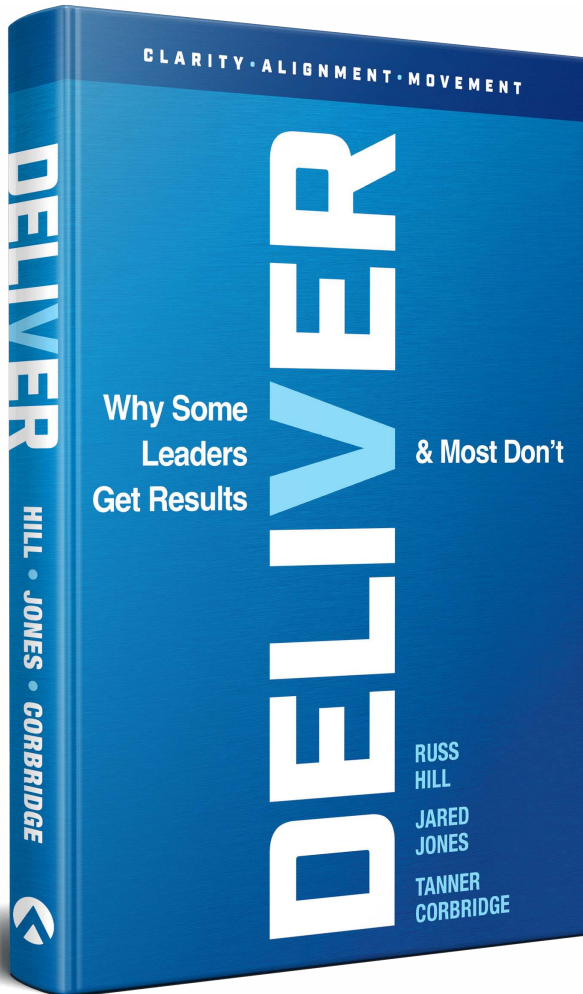


Deliver

Preview the Introduction & 1st Chapter of this new book by the Founders of Lone Rock Leadership



Introduction

“This is an effing waste of time,” Ben declared, his voice cutting through the silence like a blade. “I have zero confidence this is going to be worth a damn. I’m only here because I was told I had to show up.”

The meeting room on the fourteenth floor of the company’s Philadelphia offices suddenly went completely still. No movement. No noise. Ten executives who collectively controlled billions in revenue sat frozen, watching their head of sales—a man closer to retirement than anyone else in the room—methodically destroy the other departments in the company.

“The problem isn’t with my sales team,” Ben continued, pointing at his colleagues. “It’s your departments that are the issue. Sorry, but the truth hurts.”

When Ben finished his brutal assessment and sat down, arms crossed and head down, we realized we were witnessing something profound: a leader so frustrated by his organization’s inability to execute that he was willing to risk the repercussions of spewing unfiltered honesty rather than sit through another pointless meeting.

It wasn’t exactly the opening we anticipated to start that meeting but it wasn’t entirely surprising either. This was the world’s tenth largest company as measured by revenue and it was suffering from the same disease we had seen spreading everywhere.

The Fog In Your Org Chart

Through a sequence of unanticipated events we gained access to the highest level of many of the world’s largest organizations for the last twenty years. The consulting firm we worked for and the leadership development company

the three of us later founded have provided us a courtside seat to discussions, debates, and decisions that impact the lives of employees and customers around the world.

The problem perplexing executives universally is the inability of mid-level managers to deliver. The cause of the problem isn't a lack of desire, intelligence, or ability. It's the fog that blankets the center of the org chart. Your mid-level managers are confused.

Who can blame them? Consider how they've been trained and developed. For many of them that training has been nonexistent. They've been forced to make it up as they go along. What makes a good leader? They're combining what they've learned from their worst bosses, their best bosses, books they might have read, and some articles.

Those fortunate enough to go through formal leadership training have been handed binders of complex frameworks or put through courses of how to build trust or discover their why when what they really need help with is the one thing missing from it all.

We wrote this book for three reasons. First, because what we've witnessed deserves to be shared. You shouldn't be granted the access we've been given and keep what you see, hear, and learn to yourself. Second, to set the record straight. We noticed one thing missing from every leadership book on the bestseller lists the last couple decades, in every module of leadership training shared with us, and in all the onboarding we've reviewed of new managers at the organizations we consult. The word that's been missing is the one we ultimately chose as our title. The job of a leader above everything else is to deliver.

The third reason we wrote this book is not because we wanted to share with you what we came up with or created but rather what we discovered. It's elegantly simple and yet profound. It's the Leadership Operating System being used by the most successful leaders and it delivers sustained results. This is unlike other business books. We're not showing you what worked for one executive in one industry. We're not sharing something conceived by professors at some business school. This isn't an academic theory or a blog post that went viral and led to a book deal. This is the wisdom and insight

gained from more than 4,000 flights and 9,000 meetings.

The Access We Were Given

We've signed Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDA's) with every organization whose senior executives we consult and every company that uses our 30-day leadership training cohorts. Some of them have granted us permission to use their real names. Others we've intentionally used fake first names or broad terms to identify them (for instance a 'manufacturing company' or a 'retailer'). We've added a few details to bring real-life moments alive for you. Every person, every company, and every situation described here happened.

Get ready to walk inside the command center at Microsoft where they track every meeting invite and email sent by all of you. You're about to read the email exchanges that set off a firestorm at Amazon. You'll be in the room with the senior leaders of Target when they did the exact opposite of what Wall Street expected. We'll take you to Memphis and the warehouse where an executive decided to build the future of AI. You'll go behind the scenes of the debates at Starlink, witness the day that 20% of the workforce in a tech company quit, and travel to a most unexpected place and meet an executive who we think deserves to be studied by every business school in the world.

Our journey begins though in Silicon Valley and a night that unleashed a firestorm of debate.

We worked hard to make this book entertaining and engaging for you. We can't promise we hit that mark but what we can guarantee is that if you implement what we discovered it will profoundly impact your ability to do what matters most: Deliver.

* * *

Quick Start

We wrote this book for busy executives and managers and insisted that our publisher organize it so you can get the main points of it without having to read every page. We rarely read every chapter of books. We assumed many of you are the same. Here's your cheat sheet:

Do NOT Skip These Chapters:

- To get the main career-changing ideas of the book (trust us, that's not hyperbole) you'll absolutely want to read the following chapters:
- *Chapters 1-5, 7, 9, 14-15, 18-20*

The Tactical Chapters:

- We hope you'll read every chapter but these chapters are more focused on implementing the Leader Operating System and slow down to provide tons of tactical information:
- *Chapters 6, 8, 10-13, 16, 21-22*

Key Points:

- At the end of every chapter we provide a page called the Quick Start
- Think of it like a PowerPoint summary of that chapter's main points
- You will not benefit much if you only read these one page overviews
- But they are great quick references when you pick up the book after initially reading it and are wondering where certain ideas, stories, or frameworks are contained

Red Flags:

- Each chapter ends with a quick list of some red flags or "watch outs"
- Think of these like tips from an executive coach warning you what to

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avoid doing

- Use them to suggest chapters for certain members of your team demonstrating these watch-out behaviors

The Reality: We think you'll discover this book is something every manager in your organization can benefit from reading. It will change your results. Dig in and see if you agree. If so, contact us for bulk discounts and information about getting your HR leaders certified in it. Go to <https://www.lonerock.io>

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Leader Modes

Chapter 1: Founder Mode

He expected controversy. But he started a war.

The gathering was the kind that Silicon Valley legends are made of—a private meeting of some of the most successful people in the world, each of whom had built companies from nothing into billion-dollar enterprises. These weren't the public conferences where executives deliver polished keynotes. This was the inner circle, the sanctuary where tech's most successful leaders shared their most honest thoughts.

No recordings. No press. No one who wasn't invited.

The man preparing to address this exclusive group had built the kind of company that most Ivy League grads and dropouts only dream about. He wasn't here as a wannabe—he was here as one of Silicon Valley's newest stars.

But confidence wasn't what showed in his eyes as he prepared to speak. Instead, there was something that looked almost like betrayal—the expression of someone who had followed the so-called experts' advice after his app exploded in popularity. They told him what he had to do to scale his company as a professional CEO. Their advice - he now believed- nearly destroyed everything he'd built.

Tonight he was here to deliver a manifesto motivated by anger. Anger that they were wrong. That all the leadership experts, consultants, coaches, gurus, and board members actually didn't know what they were talking about.

Tonight he came to settle the score. To understand his rage—you have to rewind.

* * *

The rain hammered against the windows of the tiny apartment as Brian stared at his laptop screen, scrolling through yet another rejection email. The Rhode Island School of Design graduate was broke, surviving on cereal and whatever free food he could scavenge at tech meetups.

This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

Brian moved to San Francisco with the same dream that drew thousands of others: build something that mattered, get rich, and prove that a creative kid from upstate New York could make it in the big leagues. But reality had been merciless. His previous startup attempts had crashed and burned. His savings were gone. His credit cards were maxed out.

"Maybe it's time to think about a real job," his mother had suggested during their last phone call, her voice carrying that particular blend of love and exasperation that only moms can master.

But Brian couldn't shake the feeling that he was close to something, even if he couldn't quite name what it was. A design conference was coming to town, hotels were booked solid, and he and his roommate Joe Gebbia had hatched a plan that sounded farfetched even by Silicon Valley standards: rent out air mattresses in their living room to conference attendees who needed a place to crash.

They spent their last few hundred dollars building a simple website called "AirBed & Breakfast." The concept felt both obvious and insane—let strangers sleep on your floor for money. Who would trust this? Who would even try it?

The early response was devastating.

Potential users dismissed the idea as unsafe and weird. "Who would stay in some random person's apartment?" one particularly brutal response read. "This will never work." It sounded creepy.

But then, a few bookings actually trickled in. Then a few more. Over time

people listed space in their apartments or houses and users started leaving positive reviews. Word began to spread through design conference networks, then broader travel communities. What had seemed impossible—strangers trusting strangers with their safety and shelter—was actually happening.

The momentum led to investor interest. What had started as a desperate scheme to pay rent had now generated \$112 million in funding and was expanding globally. This was Airbnb, and it made Brian Chesky part of the new class of Silicon Valley’s most celebrated founders.

In December 2020 AirBnb went public and within hours was valued at more than \$100 billion. Brian’s net worth skyrocketed to more than \$11 billion personally. Renting out air mattresses (why it’s call AirBNB) had turned into renting out rooms and houses and Brian and Joe had changed the way the world traveled.

But with rapid growth came new challenges—and voices urging him to “professionalize” his management style. The message was consistent and seductive: Hire great people and get out of the way. Delegate more. Trust your team. Scale yourself by reducing your involvement in day-to-day operations. Stop being the founder and start being the CEO.

Brian listened.

He stepped back significantly from product decisions, hiring experienced executives from Google, Amazon, and other tech giants. He created layers of management between himself and the work he’d once obsessed over.

From the outside, it looked like textbook leadership evolution. Airbnb continued growing, expanding into new markets and launching ambitious initiatives.

But something was wrong.

Brian looked up one day and barely recognized the product they were building. The platform that had once felt personal, crafted, and intentional now felt corporate and disconnected from the original vision to him. Features were being shipped that he disagreed with. The company culture he’d carefully cultivated was being “optimized” by HR professionals who’d never slept on an air mattress in a stranger’s living room.

The breaking point came during a product review meeting. Brian sat in a

conference room, listening to a presentation about a new feature set that would fundamentally change how users discovered listings. The metrics looked good on paper, but the experience felt soulless to him. When he voiced concerns, he was told that the decision had already been made by the product team—a team that reported to executives who reported to other executives, creating a distance between leadership and execution that felt insurmountable.

After that meeting, Brian made a decision that would ignite one of the most contentious debates in modern management theory. It would soon spread far beyond Airbnb and Silicon Valley. Brian decided he was going to fire entire layers of management. He was done following the advice to delegate and elevate.

* * *

That was the backstory, the journey that proceeded the night in Mountain View. Brian took a deep breath and walked through the door of the meeting he had almost decided to skip. No, he needed to be here. He needed to set the record straight.

Paul Graham, the tech kingmaker, sat in the front row. Ron Conway, the now silver-haired grandfather who years ago had written some of the first checks for Google and Facebook, had found a spot near the back.

Brian was raw and completely unfiltered. He said listening to conventional wisdom about how to scale leadership was the biggest mistake he'd made in his career. What was supposed to be a quick meetup stretched for hours as Brian dismantled the management orthodoxy followed by almost every major corporation in modern times. He looked around the room at founders who'd built billion-dollar companies and said, "We've been told that great leaders hire great people and get out of the way. That's bullshit. Steve Jobs didn't get out of the way—he got deeper into the details. Bezos doesn't delegate the customer experience—he obsesses over it. We've been trained to think that caring about your product makes you a micromanager, when really it makes you a founder."

Heads around the room began nodding. Someone shouted “Yes!” from the back. These weren’t just any entrepreneurs—these were people who’d felt the same frustration, who’d been told to step back from the companies they’d bled to build. For the first time, someone was giving them permission to care again.

“We’ve been told to worry more about employee feelings than the soul of our products. More about org charts than features. More about being liked than being right. I tried it and it almost killed everything that made Airbnb special.”

Brian paid homage to how Bezos and Musk run their companies. He talked about firing 25% of his leadership team when he realized executive layers make companies soulless. Brian was unforgiving and visceral in his manifesto. Delegating wasn’t the way you scale. Taking charge, being in all the details, and not letting go of the reins was how the greatest modern leaders grew the world’s most valuable companies.

When Brian said the words “founder mode,” the room erupted. Paul Graham started taking notes furiously. Someone yelled “Founder mode!” and suddenly half the room was chanting it back: “Founder mode! Founder mode!” It wasn’t just a concept—it was a battle cry for everyone who’d been told they cared too much about their own companies.

Brian felt a huge sense of relief. What had been boiling inside him had now finally been said out loud.

He had no idea he’d just lit a fuse that would explode across Silicon Valley and then spread much further.

The Pushback Begins

It wasn’t long after the meeting ended when Kim Scott first saw the tweets celebrating founder mode as some kind of brilliant breakthrough.

The enthusiasm made her feel sick. When the New York Times reached out for her perspective, Kim didn’t mince words: “This is about obsession with ‘one-man rule’ in the tech sector. It’s unsustainable and damaging for both companies and governments.”

Kim had seen this pattern before, and she knew exactly how it ended—with broken people and broken companies, all in service of leaders who mistook fear for respect.

“The idea that one person, no matter how brilliant, can have all the answers is not just wrong—it’s dangerous,” Kim argued. “We’ve seen this pattern repeat itself over and over. A charismatic founder or executive has early success, becomes convinced that their personal involvement is the secret sauce, and then creates an organization that can’t function without them.”

After sixteen years climbing the ranks at Google and Apple, Kim had witnessed the human wreckage left behind by leaders who confused intensity with inspiration. At Google, she’d watched the company struggle with what employees called “brilliant jerks”—technically gifted individuals whose abrasive personalities and authoritarian management styles created toxic environments for everyone around them.

Rising stars whose innovative ideas were stolen by autocratic managers who then berated them for “lack of initiative.” These weren’t isolated incidents. And this wasn’t just about tech companies either. This happened in companies in all industries. This was a debate about command and control leadership styles. About executives and managers who can’t let go. Who think they know best and have to be involved in everything. Leaders who prioritize control over collaboration, that treated psychological safety as weakness rather than the foundation of innovation.

Kim had worked directly with Steve Jobs during her time at Apple. She’d seen his genius up close—the obsessive attention to detail, the impossible standards, the revolutionary products that emerged from his relentless pursuit of perfection. But she’d also witnessed the other side: the public humiliations, the impossible standards, the culture of fear that permeated certain parts of the organization. Talented employees reduced to anxiety attacks, brilliant minds second-guessing every instinct, entire teams walking on eggshells around a leader whose approval felt more like survival than success.

“The most successful leaders I’ve worked with create conditions where the best ideas can emerge from their teams,” Kim said. “That requires humility,

not heroics.”

The Network Effect Skeptic

Reid Hoffman got the same types of texts Kim got after Brian’s manifesto moment and knew he had to weigh in. Brian was a good guy with remarkable accomplishments, but he had gone too far that night.

None of the data backed up his misguided pep rally speech that was suddenly licensing every tech bro to flex and unleash their egos. Reid had spent decades studying what actually made organizations successful, and everything Brian was advocating for was a recipe for disaster.

“The research on high-performing teams consistently shows that distributed decision-making drives better outcomes than command-and-control approaches,” Reid fired back. “Founder mode might work for unicorn companies with unicorn founders, but it’s not a scalable model for most organizations.”

Reid’s frustration was personal. Growing up as the son of academics—his father a lawyer, his mother an archaeologist—he’d been raised to value evidence over ego, rigorous thinking over charismatic proclamations. And everything he’d learned in two decades of building companies told him that Brian’s founder mode was organizational poison disguised as leadership wisdom.

At PayPal, working alongside future titans like Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, and Max Levchin, Reid had witnessed what happened when brilliant individuals became convinced they were the key to everything. Companies that should have scaled hit walls. Talented people left. Innovation stagnated because everything had to flow through one person’s limited bandwidth.

Building LinkedIn had proven the opposite approach worked. The platform’s value grew exponentially as more people joined and connected—not because Reid made all the decisions, but because millions of users contributed their knowledge and insights to make the whole system smarter.

“I’ve seen this pattern play out over and over,” Reid explained, his voice carrying years of watching promising companies self-destruct. “An

executive has success, becomes convinced that their personal involvement is the key to everything, and then hits a scaling wall when their capacity becomes the bottleneck for the entire organization.”

At Greylock Partners, Reid had evaluated thousands of companies and worked closely with hundreds of CEOs. The pattern was devastatingly consistent: organizations that built strong distributed leadership capabilities outperformed those that remained dependent on founder brilliance—not sometimes, but every time.

Reid’s critique was grounded in both personal experience and rigorous research. The data was overwhelming: Organizations led by what researchers called “directive control leaders” were 34% more likely to experience significant performance drops during leadership transitions, 28% more likely to struggle with innovation metrics over five-year periods, and 45% more likely to experience talent retention problems among high-potential employees.

“When we concentrate decision-making in a single individual, we’re essentially creating a single point of failure,” Reid argued. “That might work when everything is going well, but what happens when circumstances change faster than any one person can process? What happens when that leader makes a mistake? What happens when they’re not available?”

The Debate Begins

While Kim Scott and Reid Hoffman were sounding alarms about the dangers of command and control leadership, Brian Chesky’s manifesto was exploding across Silicon Valley like wildfire.

The moment Paul Graham published his essay recounting Brian’s speech, the founder mode phenomenon went from private gathering to global conversation. He took Brian’s speech and doubled down. “C-level execs, as a class, include some of the most skillful liars in the world,” he wrote. “There’s also another, subtler force keeping founder mode from being the default: the assumption that [professional] manager mode is the grownup way to run a company. Manager mode sounds so calm and reasonable, with

its MBAs and its org charts and its systems of delegated authority. I predict founder mode will become the new default.”

The speech that had started as casual remarks to a small group of entrepreneurs and now Graham’s essay were being dissected in classrooms at Stanford and Harvard. The manifesto spread through Slack channels at Google and Tesla, shared by employees who felt vindicated by someone finally challenging the conventional wisdom about professional management.

Elon Musk retweeted Brian’s ideas. The besties on the soaring All In podcast dedicated an entire episode to debating its merits.

But the debate also revealed deeper fractures not just in Silicon Valley but across industry far and wide about leadership philosophy. What is the best leadership approach? What is the ultimate way to deliver results? How should a manager or executive drive performance? Leaders get paid to deliver results. But how they do it is ultimately their choice. They get to decide. Founder mode or something different?

This Isn’t About Tech Companies

We’ve seen the champions of founder mode up close and in person repeatedly during our twenty years of consulting executive teams. In the chapters ahead you’ll have a front-row seat to some of those moments and the debates they ignited in their organizations. One of those moments was in Dallas. A retired general went to work in the private sector. He was given the task to stand up a new business line in the Fortune 50 company that hired him. In less than five years he did something most remarkable. He and his team created more than a billion dollars of new revenue. Bob was celebrated. But he was also loathed.

In a feedback session we facilitated among the senior executive team Bob received candid feedback. His peers on the executive team praised all of his accomplishments but they also were honest about how he was difficult to work with. They detailed how their teams hesitated to collaborate with his team. In our view they professionally and respectfully informed Bob of the tension his approach had introduced to the organization. People at all layers

felt it.

It came time for Bob to respond to the feedback. Instead of choosing humility and considering perhaps he and his team had leaned too far into a stand and salute approach he looked like a clone of Brian that night in Mountain View. Bob looked and sounded like a defense attorney who heard all the prosecution's compelling witnesses and then stood and declared them all misguided softies. Bob was brief, unapologetic, and unmovable.

The meeting ended. We grabbed our suitcases from the corner of the room. On our way out of the building one of Bob's colleagues, a respected executive who oversaw a huge part of the business, pulled us aside. She had tears in her eyes but spoke in calm tones. "I'm done," she said to us softly. "I told myself if it ever got like this here I wouldn't stay. That moment has come," she said.

Founder mode will get you fired at some companies. At others it appears to be the only path to promotion. Does it have merit? Without question. Does it also negatively impact organizations and individuals? The evidence is irrefutable.

Back in Silicon Valley, Brian found himself energized by the controversy he created. Speaking requests poured in from conferences around the world. Business journalists called for quotes.

A symbol of Brian's unexpected new celebrity status arrived in a package at Airbnb headquarters: a black baseball cap with huge white letters spelling out "FOUNDER MODE."

Brian opened the box, smiled and laughed as he showed colleagues what some new fan had sent him. And then he took the cap, walked into the executive conference room, and placed it on one of the shelves where all would see it during future meetings.

While the battle lines were clearly drawn over founder mode and its authoritarian style, neither side seemed to recognize they might both be fighting the wrong war entirely. What if they were getting lost in an argument that was actually a side show? What if the real solution - the most effective way to lead - was something they had missed completely? What if the unicorns stealing the headlines and the media addicted to clickbait

controversy had been distracted from observing the quiet movement that was scaling organizations and the careers of leaders who discovered another way to deliver?

* * *

Chapter 1: Founder Mode - Quick Start

Key Points:

- Brian Chesky's manifesto rejected "hire great people and get out of the way"
- Founder Mode = hands-on, systematic, leader-driven control
- Creates impressive short-term results but burns relationships long-term
- Like performance steroids - gains that can't be sustained without escalating costs

Red Flags You're in Founder Mode:

- Team waits for your decisions on everything
- High turnover among talented people
- You're the bottleneck for most initiatives
- People comply but don't contribute ideas

The Third Leader Reality: Founder Mode isn't sustainable because it doesn't scale beyond the leader's capacity.

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