

The 13 Symptoms of a Broken Pipeline

What you are seeing on the surface, what is actually broken underneath, and where to look first.

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The symptom is loud. The cause is quiet.

I have diagnosed 25+ B2B revenue engines. The same 13 symptoms keep showing up. The fix is rarely what the buyer thinks it is.

Every founder who comes to me arrives with a diagnosis already made. Outbound is broken. The messaging needs work. The sales process needs tightening. We need a better SDR.

They are describing a symptom. Almost never the cause.

The two rarely live in the same part of the engine. A meetings problem is often a trust problem. An outbound problem is often an ICP problem. A conversion problem is often an awareness problem, three stages upstream of where the pain is showing.

Treating symptoms without identifying the cause is **how fixes fail to stick.**

This document is the scaffolding I use. Thirteen symptoms, the causes that sit underneath each one, and the part of the engine to go and look at.

It will not fix your pipeline on its own. It will stop you fixing the wrong thing.

Four steps, about twenty minutes

STEP 1

Match what you are seeing

Look at what is actually happening in your engine right now. Match it to one to three symptoms from the table. Most engines show more than one at a time.

STEP 2

Pick the cause that fits

Each symptom has three common causes. Pick the one your evidence supports. Do not guess. What you have observed has to justify the pick.

STEP 3

Go upstream

Most of these point upstream. Outbound problems are usually foundation problems. Conversion problems are usually marketing problems. The bottleneck is rarely where the leak is showing up.

STEP 4

Ground the fix in a pillar

Every cause maps to one or more of the ten pillars later in this document. That is where the work goes. If you are seeing symptom 2 and your founder brand pillar is visibly low, the fix is trust-layer work, not another outbound iteration.

Symptoms 1 to 5

#	SYMPTOM	ROOT CAUSE 1	ROOT CAUSE 2	ROOT CAUSE 3
1	Low reply rate (under 4%)	Wrong message	Wrong audience	Wrong channel
2	Replies but no meetings	No trust on lookup	Awareness mismatch	Weak follow-up
3	Bad-fit leads despite scoring	Company-level scoring, no individual filter	Anti-ICP not locked	Channel attracting wrong audience
4	Meetings stall, deals do not progress	Sales process informal	Wrong buyer awareness	No ROI or proof case
5	Long sales cycles	Targeting too high	Buyer not budgeted	No urgency

Most of these point **upstream**. The bottleneck is rarely where the leak is showing up.

Symptoms 6 to 9

#	SYMPTOM	ROOT CAUSE 1	ROOT CAUSE 2	ROOT CAUSE 3
6	"Interesting but not now" then ghost	No reactive engine	Status quo bias	Wrong moment
7	Things that worked do not anymore	Foundation reset needed	Channel saturation	Market shift
8	Marketing or SDR hire not producing	No strategy to plug into	Hired before playbook built	Wrong channel mix
9	Founder still selling past £500K to £1M	No documented playbook	No proof to enable non-founder	First hire did not fit

THE ONE THAT COSTS THE MOST

Symptom 8

The hire is usually the symptom, not the cause. You hired because you had no system, then asked that person to produce results from the system they were hired to build. Two jobs, one salary, one quarter.

Symptoms 10 to 13

#	SYMPTOM	ROOT CAUSE 1	ROOT CAUSE 2	ROOT CAUSE 3
10	Cold outreach not connecting	Channel fading	Approach too pitchy	Wrong list quality
11	Happy customers, no referrals	No advocacy programme	Customers lack referral language	No community
12	Pipeline healthy, forecast missing	"Active" confused with "progressing"	Qualification not real	No defined stage milestones
13	Inbound dry, SEO not producing	No content engine	Wrong keyword strategy	No AIO presence

HOW TO READ THE TABLE

Pick the one that hurts most

Then look at which pillars it maps to on the next pages. Cross-reference against how you would honestly score those pillars. The pillar with the lowest score in that row is the most likely cause.

The 10 pillars, 1 to 5

Every cause above lives in one of ten pillars. This is what a real diagnostic scores. The signals on the right are what a low score looks like from the outside.

#	PILLAR	SIGNALS OF A LOW SCORE
P1	Strategy & GTM Essentials	Vague positioning, cannot articulate "why us" clearly
P2	ICP & Persona Precision	Broad demographic targeting, no anti-ICP
P3	Outbound & Demand Generation	Spray-and-pray, no behavioural triggers
P4	Founder Brand & Visibility	Dark on LinkedIn, no defined voice
P5	Credibility Assets & Proof	Anonymous case studies, no video testimonials

The 10 pillars, 6 to 10

#	PILLAR	SIGNALS OF A LOW SCORE
P6	Content & Marketing Engine	One channel doing everything
P7	Trust Network & Distribution	Not present in buyer communities
P8	Sales Process & Conversion	Founder closes from gut, no defined stages
P9	Learning Loop & Compounding	Calls not reviewed, no weekly signal review
P10	Team, Capacity & Ownership	Just founders, no GTM hires

Score each pillar honestly. **The point is not to feel good. The point is to know where to look.**

Five stages, running in parallel

The pillars sit inside five stages. They run at the same time, not in sequence. A symptom that surfaces in one stage is usually caused by something missing in another.

STAGE 1

Messaging, ICP & GTM Clarity

Pillars 1 and 2.

STAGE 2

Lead Generation & Learning

Pillars 3 and 9.

STAGE 3

Trust Building

Pillars 4, 5, 6 and 7.

STAGE 4

Sales Process

Pillar 8.

STAGE 5

Scale

Pillars 6 and 10. Only earned if stages 1 to 4 average above 6. Scaling before that amplifies what is broken upstream.

Symptoms rarely arrive alone

These combinations show up again and again. If one describes you, the fix is listed with it.

The vision founder

Symptoms 1, 3, and likely 7. No ICP, no outbound, but the founder brand exists. The message is a vision, not a sale.

The fix: run a stage 3 or 4 awareness message in parallel with the stage 1 vision.

Sophisticated stack, no trust

Symptom 2 dominant. Outbound scores high. The trust layer scores 2 or 3.

The fix: a foundation reset for trust, not more outbound iteration.

Three GTMs in parallel

Symptoms 3 and 6 combined. The founder is chasing several half-defined personas at once.

The fix: pick one for 90 days and let the others compound for free.

Three more worth knowing

About to hire an SDR into chaos

Symptom 8, pending. There is no system for the hire to plug into yet.

The fix: build the system first, then hire. In that order, it is a much easier job to be good at.

Founder-led past £500K

Symptom 9. No documented playbook, and no proof that would let anyone but the founder close.

The fix: the playbook and the credibility layer, before the next hire.

New market failing after home success

Trust does not transfer. The foundation for the new market was never rebuilt, because at home it was invisible and already doing the work.

The fix: a foundation reset for the new market, and cross-sell your existing logos to their entities in that market.

You now know which symptom you are sitting on.

The next question is which pillar underneath it is actually the cause, and what to fix first. That part is a conversation, not a document.

The 30-minute diagnostic. I will tell you which of the 13 symptoms you have, where the bottleneck actually is, and what I would build in month one. You get the notes either way.

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15 years in B2B GTM · 3x CRO · 1 IPO · 1 exit · founder of Flowla

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