The Belief Trap



Hi, Raghav here.

These are 5 dispatches on the leadership beliefs keeping your team dependent on you — even when you're trying not to be.

Let’s go!

Most operational advice focuses on the systems - what to build, what to fix, how to delegate. What it skips is the harder question: why do founders keep stepping back in, even after they've built systems that should let the team decide?

The answer is almost always in the beliefs underneath the systems. The belief that nobody else can do it right. That stepping back means losing control. That being needed is the same as being valuable. These beliefs feel like good leadership. They're also the reason nothing sticks.

Five dispatches on the assumptions that keep social impact founders stuck in the middle of everything and what it looks like when they shift. (Names, dates and identifiers changed to maintain anonymity)

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Email 1: The Addiction No One Talks About - Are Hooked On Being The Hero?

The senior leader sat across from me, resignation letter in hand.

“I just don’t feel needed anymore,” he said. “Everything runs too smoothly now.”

This conversation happened just months after we’d implemented new systems that eliminated the daily fires that had once defined his department.

The same fires this leader had brilliantly extinguished, time and again.

I was confused.

Wasn’t this what we wanted?

A team that functioned without constant emergency intervention?

It wasn’t until later that I understood what was happening:

Crisis management had become his addiction.

The rush of solving urgent problems.

The immediate validation when he saved the day.

The clear purpose of being the hero everyone needed.

The visible impact of his expertise.

These emotional rewards were powerful, immediate, and reinforcing.

They had become his professional identity.

Meanwhile, the rewards of building systems that prevent fires?

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They're delayed, less visible, and initially less satisfying.

Look around your organisation.

Notice who gets the attention:

The manager who stayed up all night to fix the client emergency.
The team lead who pulled off the impossible deadline.
The director who personally intervened to save the struggling project.

Crisis management isn't just permitted in most organisations. It's celebrated. Rewarded. Glorified.

And that creates a dangerous cycle - where leaders unknowingly become addicted to the very problems they should be preventing.

Today's Permission Slip:

You have permission to find your value beyond being the emergency responder - even if it means giving up the rush of being the hero.

This permission feels uncomfortable because:

What if your contributions become less visible when you're not constantly saving the day?
What if your team truly becomes self-sufficient, and you wonder about your purpose?
What if you miss the adrenaline rush and immediate gratification of crisis management?

But consider what becomes possible when you break free from the hero addiction:

Instead of being needed in every crisis, you create systems that prevent crises altogether.
Instead of being valued for your firefighting, you're valued for your fireproofing.
Instead of finding purpose in emergency response, you find it in sustainable success.

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This Week's Practice:

Start noticing your relationship with crisis.

After your next emergency response, pause to write down:

What emotional rewards did you get from handling this crisis?
How did solving it make you feel about your value as a leader?
What would have happened if systems had prevented it entirely?
Then ask yourself: “If this type of emergency never happened again, what would I lose? What would I gain?”

The goal isn’t to abandon responsible crisis management.

It’s to recognise when you might be unconsciously perpetuating cycles of emergency because of the emotional rewards they provide.

This Week’s Question:

What recurring crisis gives you the strongest sense of being valuable to your team? (And what might happen if you built systems that eliminated it entirely?)

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Email 2: When Excellence Becomes An Excuse

Three senior hires in eighteen months.

Each one brought impressive credentials. Each one left within 18 months and each time, the explanation was the same: “They just didn’t fit our culture.”

But the team kept shipping exceptional work. The products remained industry leading and their reputation stayed stellar.

What was it that these senior hires saw that everyone else had learned not to notice?

The Pattern That Hides in Plain Sight

There’s a particular kind of organisation that produces world class work while operating in profoundly dysfunctional ways.

Outstanding results in the core work.
Technical excellence. Creative breakthroughs. Products that win awards.

But dysfunction in almost everything else.
Chaotic decision making. Ad hoc management. People scrambling to figure out basic operational questions.

The excellence in one area often becomes permission for dysfunction in the others.

“We’re producing world class work so our approach is working.”

But that’s not what’s happening. These organisations are producing world class work despite their approach and it’s costing more than anyone wants to calculate.

The experienced people who leave aren’t rejecting the standards. They’re rejecting the unsustainable chaos required to meet those standards.

They’ve worked in places where:

- High quality didn't require constant firefighting.
- Clear decisions happened without weekly drama.
- Excellence and functional operations coexisted.

They know it's possible to have both yet these organisations are asking them to accept that it's not.

What about the people who stay? There's a pattern there too:

Long-term employees who joined early and have normalised the chaos as "just how things are."

People with limited outside experience who don't realise that other high performing organisations don't operate this way.

Those who've learned that suggesting improvements gets met with "That's not how we do things here."

When the only people who survive are those who've stopped questioning, that's not high standards. That's learned helplessness dressed up as culture.

Why This Pattern Persists

When a system produces strong results despite dysfunction, three things tend to happen:
1. The results justify the chaos
"We shipped on time" becomes proof that the late night scrambles were necessary, rather than evidence of poor planning.

2. Managers become shock absorbers
Constantly translating leadership chaos into team clarity, smoothing over operational gaps and making up for broken systems. Their competence enables the dysfunction to continue.

3. The unsustainable gets normalised
Eventually people stop noticing that other organisations don't operate this way. The constant firefighting becomes "just what high performance requires."

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Today's Permission Slip
You have permission to acknowledge that technical excellence doesn't excuse operational dysfunction.

This feels risky to say because:

What if people think it means lowering standards?
What if teams interpret this as permission to do mediocre work?
What if leadership sees this as disloyalty to "what made us successful"?

But here's what becomes clear over time:
The leaders and organisations that last aren't the ones producing great work through heroic effort and constant firefighting. They're the ones who figured out how to produce great work sustainably.

The best run organisations prove this isn't a fantasy. It's possible to have:
- Cutting-edge output AND clear decision making
- High standards AND functional operations
- Outstanding results AND healthy teams

These aren't opposing forces. They're complementary. One organisation I admire here is 37Signals.

This Week's Practice
One diagnostic question worth considering:

"What am I personally compensating for that should actually be a system?"

Maybe it's:
- Translating unclear direction from above into actionable plans
- Making up for the lack of cross functional coordination
- Being the unofficial decision maker because actual decision making is unclear
- Protecting the team from organisational chaos

Worth writing down what comes up. Not to fix it yet. Just to see it clearly.

Because the first step to building something sustainable isn't implementing new systems. It's recognising which parts of current "excellence" are actually built on unsustainable heroics.

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This Week's Question
What would happen to your team's output if they stopped compensating for broken systems for just one week?

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P.S. If the first reaction to reading this is "but our results prove our approach works", that's exactly the logic that keeps the pattern alive. Results in spite of dysfunction aren't proof that dysfunction is necessary. They're proof that teams are exceptional at working around broken systems. Imagine what they could do with functional ones?

Email 3: Are Your High Standards Keeping Your Team Mediocre

It was midnight and she was still working on the grant proposal due at 00:30.
Not because she procrastinated.
Not because she was disorganised.
But because with so much on her plate, this critical task – one she believed only she could do properly – had been pushed to the deadline.

Sound familiar?

I just reconnected with a former colleague – a brilliant researcher who's still writing every grant proposal, protocol and research paper herself, ten years after we first worked together.

When I asked why she hadn't developed her team to take some of this on, her answer was immediate:
"No one is good enough to do what I do."

This is what I call the Excellence Trap – the belief that our high standards justify doing everything ourselves.

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The conviction that others simply can't reach our level of quality, so delegation would mean compromising on excellence.

It's the reason many of us:

Still handle client presentations ourselves.
Rewrite team members' reports late at night.
Jump in to "fix" work rather than coaching.
Stay caught in the daily operations instead of thinking strategically.

We tell ourselves we're maintaining quality.

What we're actually doing is maintaining exhaustion.

Today's Permission Slip:
You have permission to prioritise team development over personal perfection.

This feels uncomfortable because:

What if quality really does suffer?
What if clients or stakeholders notice?
What if others think you're lowering your standards?
What if you're seen as less committed?

Let me share a story from early in my leadership journey:

As program lead for a global health study, I had to present performance data in monthly meetings with government stakeholders. These were high-stakes presentations where precision and credibility were essential.

After three months of doing these presentations myself, I handed this responsibility to a manager on my team.

His response: "Please don't make me do this. I'll do all the field implementation work, but not this."

He was terrified. But I knew something he didn't – he was ready. Not perfectly ready, but ready enough.

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A few months later, he thanked me. “If you hadn’t pushed me, I would never have discovered I could do this,” he said. This was something he hadn’t done in 15 years of working.

Here’s what I’ve learned since then:

High-performing, self-running teams aren’t built by finding perfect people.

They’re built through systems that develop people – turning B players into A players through deliberate investment.

The Real Truth About Excellence:
True excellence isn’t about you doing everything perfectly.

It’s about building a team that collectively achieves more than you ever could alone.

Think about it, every time you say “I’ll just do it myself because it’s faster,” you’re trading long-term freedom for short-term efficiency.

Every time you think “they’re not ready yet,” you’re ensuring they never will be.

This Week's Practice:
Start with just one responsibility.

Choose something that:

You currently handle yourself.
Isn’t immediately mission-critical.
Has room for learning without catastrophic consequences.

Then, create a simple development system:

Clarify expectations: What good looks like, not just the how-to steps.
Create a safety net: Define when they should seek input vs. proceed independently.
Allow for iteration: Build in review cycles that become less frequent over time.
Focus feedback on growth: What to improve next, not just what went wrong.

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Here's the irony of my former colleague's response?
She isn't struggling to find the perfect researcher because her standards are too high.

She is struggling because her people development standards aren't high enough.

This Week's Question:
What one responsibility are you still handling yourself that, with proper support, your team could take on? What's the first step to transferring it?

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Email 4: Stop Trying To Be The Visionary

David stared at the presentation deck, frustrated.

His team had just pitched an idea that contradicted his initial instincts about the project direction. Everything in him wanted to redirect them back to his original vision.

After all, wasn't that what good leaders do? Have the vision? See the bigger picture? Know the right answer?

He'd been told countless times that great leaders are visionaries who can see what others can't. The Steve Jobs stories. The bold decisions. The unwavering conviction that transforms companies.

But something felt off about always being the one with the answers.

We've been sold a myth about leadership that's actually making us worse leaders.

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The myth goes like this:
Great leaders are visionaries who see the future clearly and guide their teams toward that vision with unwavering conviction.
They trust their instincts, make bold decisions and don't let others derail their brilliant insights.

It sounds inspiring. It feels heroic. And it's deeply damaging.

Here's what this myth actually creates:

Teams that stop thinking. When we're always the visionary, our team learns their job is execution, not innovation. They stop bringing us their best ideas because they've learned we already have the answer.

Decisions that miss crucial perspectives. Our "vision" might be brilliant, but it's still limited by our own experience and blind spots. The insights our team could contribute never surface because the hero narrative doesn't have room for them.

Organisations that can't scale. Companies built around one person's perfect judgment are inherently fragile. What happens when the visionary is wrong? Or unavailable? Or leaves?

The real story behind most "visionary" success is messier and more collaborative than the myths suggest.

Take the Steve Jobs narrative everyone loves to repeat.

Yes, he was a remarkable leader.

But here's what often gets left out: He initially resisted the "Think Different" campaign. He didn't support the iPhone concept at first.

Even visionary leaders need systems and people around them who can challenge, refine and improve their ideas.

The culture that made Apple unique wasn't just top-down vision, it was the productive tension between ideas, the willingness to fight for better solutions, the systems that turned individual insights into collective breakthroughs.

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Today's Permission Slip:
You have permission to stop being the hero of every story and start building a culture where the best ideas win, regardless of where they come from.

This feels risky because what if your team thinks you don't have vision? What if they lose confidence in your leadership? What if stepping back makes you seem less valuable?

But consider this: Which is more valuable: a leader who always has the right answer or a leader who creates conditions where the right answers emerge consistently?

This Week's Practice:
Next time your team proposes something that contradicts your instincts, try this response:

"That's interesting. Help me understand your thinking. What am I missing?"

Then do the harder part: Actually listen. Look for the insight you might have overlooked. Consider the possibility that their perspective, combined with yours, might create something better than either alone.

You'll know it's working when your team starts challenging each other's ideas, not just deferring to yours.

When the quality of solutions improves because multiple perspectives are actively contributing.

When your organisation becomes more innovative, not less, as you step back from being the sole source of vision.

The goal isn't to become a passive leader. It's to become a leader who multiplies thinking rather than replacing it.

This Week's Question:
What idea have you been pushing that might benefit from your team's pushback?

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Email 5: “Inclusive Culture” And Its Hidden Costs

"Don't make me cry."

That's what my friend, a comms lead at an education non profit said when I asked her about the logo redesign.
Not because she was overwhelmed with work. Not because the brief was complicated.
Because nine months in, the project was still going nowhere and she knew exactly why.

She and her team had spent months selecting an agency. Then the Founder overruled the decision and handed it to the internal team instead. Now the logo and brand identity were being shaped by everyone from board members to junior staff.

Everyone had a voice. Nobody had authority.

My friend whose job it was to lead communications was reduced to watching the chaos, powerless to stop it.

From the outside, it looked like an inclusive culture.
Everyone's input was welcomed. No one was shut out. The founder kept the door open to every perspective.

But here's what was actually happening:
The founder wasn't being democratic. They were avoiding conflict.
There's a difference and it matters enormously.

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A genuinely inclusive leader decides who has input on what, and when the input window closes. They separate consultation from decision-making. They protect their team's time and sanity by being clear about what's actually up for debate.

A conflict-avoidant leader keeps the door open indefinitely, not because they value everyone's perspective, but because closing it means disappointing someone. Saying no. Taking a position that someone might push back on.

So the meeting happens again. And again. Another round of feedback. Another revision. Another stakeholder who hasn't weighed in yet.

Until finally when the paralysis becomes unbearable the founder steps in and decides unilaterally anyway.

Which is the most corrosive move of all because now the team has experienced the worst of both worlds: all the slowness of consensus, with none of the safety of it.

I've seen the alternative up close too.

A few years back at another organisation, a brand refresh came up. The founder and I worked directly with a positioning consultant and a designer. We sought input. We made decisions. We moved. The project got done.

Same complexity. Different belief about what leadership requires.

Today's Permission Slip:
You have permission to close the input window even when it feels uncomfortable to do so.

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Inclusive leadership doesn't mean everyone votes on everything. It means people are heard at the right moment, by the right person, for the right decision.

When you blur that line, when you let "everyone has a voice" become a substitute for "someone has to decide", you're protecting yourself from the discomfort of using your authority.

And sometimes like my friend, your Comms lead pays the price.

The Practice:
For any project currently stalled, ask three questions:

Who actually owns this decision?
Has that person been given genuine authority or just the appearance of it?
What are you avoiding by keeping the input window open?

The answer to that third question is usually where the real work begins.

This Week's Question:
Where in your organisation is "we're still gathering input" actually code for "I don't want to be the one who decides"?

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