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What a CEO Actually Does:

The 7 Essential Responsibilities
for every founder & CEO

Follow this blueprint:

Ask most CEOs what their job is, and you'll get a vague answer. That's a problem.

After scaling Classy from a pub crawl fundraiser to a $100M+ revenue platform serving thousands of nonprofits, and eventually selling to GoFundMe in 2022, I learned something most founders never talk about.

A **founder** builds the product. A **CEO** architects the company. The founder mindset is hands-on, scrappy, and focused on finding product-market fit. The CEO mindset shifts toward building teams, designing systems, and creating the conditions for others to execute.

Most startup founders excel as builders. They know how to get things done and figure things out. They're scrappy and relentless. But their early success creates false confidence. They never build the right team and systems. They become the bottleneck of their own business.

The role of CEO can be learned. Most founders fail not from lack of talent, but from never studying the role itself. A study of identical twins raised apart found that only 30% of leadership emergence traces to genetics, the other 70% comes from learning, practice, and experience.

After 20 years of building companies, I've identified the 7 core responsibilities that separate great CEOs from everyone else. I now call them the **CEO-7**, and they're the backbone of everything I teach at Highland Academy.

This resource breaks down each one.

Get my CEO Kit

Builder vs. Scaler

BUILDER MINDSET

- Hunting for product-market fit
- Hands-on, scrappy, doing it all
- Speed over process Founder as
- the product Instinct-driven
- decisions Small team, direct
- control

SCALER MINDSET

- Pushing growth post-PMF
- Building teams and systems
- Process enables speed
- Founder as the architect Data-
- informed decisions Large team,
- designed systems

KEY INSIGHT

The skills that got you here won't get you there. The transition from ***Builder to Scaler is not optional.*** *It's the difference between building a product and building a company. This shift typically happens around $1M in revenue.*

Adopting a scaling mindset doesn't mean you stop building entirely. You just spend more time building the future than executing the present.

You need to transition from working on all the details all the time, to working on the right details at the right time. There is a massive difference. This means spending your time on two things: guardrails and checkpoints.

Every great CEO masters seven core responsibilities. I call them the **CEO-7**. Clarity, rhythm, and standards form the foundation. When these three are running well, the other four, team, cash, stakeholders, and self-management become significantly easier.

Get my CEO Kit

The CEO-7

01 **Operating Clarity**

Why are we here? Where are we going? How are we doing?

02 **Operating Rhythm**

Annual planning, quarterly execution, weekly cadence.

03 **Operating Standards**

What great looks like a cross product, brand, and performance.

04 **Build the Right Team**

Recruit, develop, and retain the people who can execute your vision.

05 **Find & Optimize Cash**

Own the financial plan.Know every number.

06 **Manage Stakeholders**

Board, investors, partners, customers—every relationship matters.

07 **Manage Yourself**

Your personal performance impacts every decision.

"Clarity, rhythm, and standards are the foundation.
These first three power the other four."

Operating Clarity

THREE QUESTIONS EVERY CEO MUST ANSWER:

01 **Why are we here?** Mission & Values

02 **Where are we going?** Vision & Strategy

03 **How are we doing?** Goals & Metrics

Creating absolute clarity for your team across your mission, values, vision, strategy, goals, and metrics is the single most important thing a CEO does. Confusion kills most companies. Not competition.

Your company's Northstar defines the complete picture: a clear mission (why you exist), values (how you operate), vision ladder 3, 5, 10, and 20 years (where you're heading), and goals with metrics (how you track progress).

Every year, when the company creates its annual goals, they must align with the company vision especially the 3-year vision because it's closest. There should never be a scenario where your company's annual goals do not align with your vision.

Push for 3 goals maximum. One Money Slide. Simple dashboards. Clear vision horizons. If your team can't explain the company's direction in 30 seconds, you have a clarity problem.

When clarity is strong, decision-making speeds up across the entire organization. People need to know the mission, they need to have clear goals, and they act accordingly.

"Confusion (not competition)
kills most companies."

Operating Rhythm

Building an operating cadence your team can fully rely on. Annual planning and forecasting, quarterly execution cycles, monthly and weekly routines that keep leaders aligned and accountable.

THE CADENCE

ANNUAL
Set company goals, build the financial plan, align with the Board of Directors, and design the org for growth.

QUARTERLY
Review progress, adjust tactics, reset priorities, recalibrate team WhyGos around what matters most right now.

MONTHLY
Update the financial plan with actuals, analyze the why behind every hit and miss, and make strategic adjustments.

WEEKLY
Dashboard reviews, team standups, 1-on-1s. The heartbeat that keeps the whole machine moving forward.

Each month and quarter, the finance team updates the financial plan with actuals, how you performed in that period, and the CEO analyzes the why behind any hit or miss and makes the necessary adjustments.

When rhythm is strong, your team stops guessing and starts executing. They know what's coming, when it's coming, and what's expected. Rhythm creates trust. It's the difference between a team that reacts and a team that runs.

Set Cultural Standards

What does "great" look like to you? This is one of the most important questions a CEO must answer. As CEO, you define and defend standards across four critical areas:

THE FOUR STANDARDS

PRODUCT
What does world-class product look like? Define it. Inspect it. Hold the bar as you grow. Unquestionable quality is a founder trait that must scale.

BRAND
Your brand is your promise. From how your product looks and feels to how your team communicates, every touchpoint reflects your standards and your values.

LEADERSHIP
Define what great leadership looks like at every level. From IC managers to your executive team. Publish it. Coach to it. Never tolerate mediocrity.

PERFORMANCE
Clear expectations for individual and team performance. Metrics, behaviors, and outcomes that everyone understands. Inspect what you expect.

Standards are the immune system of your company. When they're strong, bad decisions get rejected naturally. When they're weak, mediocrity creeps in at every level, and by the time you notice, it's already become the culture.

> "Inspect what you expect."

Build an Elite Team

> People are not your most important asset.
> The right people are. - Jim Collins

Jim Collins nailed it. He's exactly right. As CEO, it's your job to assemble the RIGHT team that can execute your vision. Don't hand this off to HR. It's your responsibility to personally recruit key hires, set hiring criteria, and continuously redesign the org chart as growth demands new skills. You don't need to interview every person, but you must design the selection and filtration process.

This is one of the highest-leverage activities you have as CEO.

Once you have the right people, the next challenge is sustaining high-performance quarter-after-quarter, year-after-year. Every company will have its own spin, but over the last 20 years I've found elite teams share ten essential ingredients, with five standing above the rest:

01 **Shared purpose**

02 **Clear direction**

03 **Aligned incentives**

04 **Merit-based recognition**

05 **Leadership development**

Do these well, and you'll turn a group of talented individuals into an unstoppable force.

"The unlock for scale is enabling others to do more."

Find & Optimize Cash

Here's the golden rule: **Never run out of money.**

Many argue this is the CEO's #1 job. Cash is the lifeblood of business, so I get why they say it. Regardless of where it ranks in priority, finding and optimizing cash is essential to a CEO's success. A company's financial plan forecasts revenue, expenses, profit and cash flow for the fiscal year, then breaks it out into months and quarters.

01 **Selecting the type of financing** (equity, note, traditional debt, etc.)

02 **Finding the right investment partners** (angels, VCs, PE, banks, etc.)

03 **Pitching the business** (deck, financial forecast, etc.)

04 **Leading due diligence** (financials, corporate docs, etc.)

05 **Managing investor relationships** (managing stakeholders)

Then, each month and quarter, the finance team updates the financial plan with "actuals" (how you performed in that period). The CEO analyzes the "why" behind any hit or miss and makes the necessary adjustments moving forward.

Cash optimization goes well beyond fundraising though. It starts with strong expense management. Salaries are typically your largest expense. To keep costs down, stay lean and implement a performance-based compensation model where everyone gets reasonable base salaries but is paid more when the company achieves its goals.

Manage Key Relationships

The CEO has many stakeholder relationships it needs to keep happy, excited, and supportive in its journey to scale the organization.

Average CEOs pass these relationships off to others (or ignore them altogether). Top CEOs prioritize these stakeholders and understand that strong relationships increase the probability of their long-term success.

They also realize that each stakeholder is involved with the company for different reasons and requires unique levels of communication, information, motivation, and reassurance to stay on track. They proactively design touch points with each to keep things on a high note.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

- **Employees**
- **Customers**
- **Partners**
- **Board of Directors**
- **Investors**

But inevitably, each stakeholder relationship will have its low points. When the relationship trends downward, it's the CEO's job to lean in and get it back on track. They are the #1 relationship manager and need to own that role. Top CEOs don't run from conflict.

Since the CEO reports to the Board of Directors, this is an especially important relationship to manage correctly. Top CEOs keep the Board in the loop on all major decisions and business activities, but they don't let the Board get too involved in daily operations. There is a fine line here, and expectation setting is critical.

Manage Yourself as the Leader

When my lead investor tried to push me out, I stopped taking care of myself. I was drinking more to take the edge off. Sleeping less. Exercising never. The stress of the situation was eating me alive, and I was feeding it instead of fighting it.

After we survived the investor ordeal and got the company back on track, I made a change. I started thinking like a professional athlete. Your personal performance impacts every decision, relationship, and strategic move. When you're burned out, distracted, or numbing the stress, it shows everywhere. In your patience. In your judgment. In how you show up for your team.

My CEO self-care formula isn't rocket science, but it is effective:

- **Eat well:** Your brain needs proper fuel for complex decisions
- **Exercise regularly:** Physical fitness improves mental clarity and stress resilience
- **Optimize sleep:** Critical decisions require mental sharpness, not exhaustion
- **Cut the crutches:** Alcohol, doom-scrolling, whatever your escape is. Notice it and dial it back.
- **Get a non-work hobby:** Creates mental space for breakthrough thinking

Think of your energy as a gas tank. If you go full speed without breaks you'll stall out. Most people will tell you to take more time off, but that's not realistic, or even desirable, for most founders and CEOs. To be honest, I found that my energy depleted faster from things like:

- Endless back-to-back meetings
- Saying "yes" to too many things
- Trying to lead every project myself

This is a scaling problem. As you scale your company, it's essential to create the right boundaries WITHIN your company's operating rhythm that give you space to think and allow you to recharge your battery.

Conclusion

The role of CEO shouldn't be a mystery. It can be studied, practiced, and mastered. Use this as your blueprint.

1. Start with clarity.
2. Build a reliable rhythm.
3. Maintain high standards.
4. Assemble the right team.
5. Optimize resources.
6. Manage relationships.
7. Take care of yourself.

Your future self, and your company, will thank you.

If you want to go even deeper, get my CEO Kit

Proven across dozens of high-growth companies, this ready-to-use leadership kit gives you everything you need to master the 7 essential responsibilities of a CEO, and master the transition from “founder” to “ceo”

My CEO Kit includes:

- ✓ 60-minute masterclass
- ✓ 7 responsibiliites of a CEO PDF Guide to implement
- ✓ Insights from Scot
- ✓ AI Coach to help you understand your CEO Priorities
- ✓ BONUS- Norhtstar Clarity Template

Get the Kit