

VENKATARANGAN THIRUMALAI

# THE FOUNDER CATALYST

REAL LESSONS TO TRANSFORM  
FOUNDERS INTO CEOS



# FOUNDER CATALYST

*Real Lessons to Transform Founders into CEOs*

Venkatarangan Thirumalai



First published in June 2025 by Oxygen Books  
*An imprint of New Horizon Media Private Limited*

Copyright © 2025

Venkatarangan Thirumalai Nallan Chakravarthy

The views and opinions expressed in this book  
are the author's own and the facts are as reported by him,  
and the publishers are not in any way liable for the same.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted  
in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying,  
recording or otherwise) without the prior permission of the publishers.

*All illustrations, photos and images are for informational purposes only  
and are copyrighted by their respective owners.*

ISBN 978-81-984009-5-6

***Founder Catalyst***

*Real Lessons to Transform Founders into CEOs*

**Oxygen Books**

New Horizon Media Private Limited  
177/103, First Floor, Ambal's Building, Lloyds Road,  
Royapettah, Chennai - 600 014. Ph: +91-44-4200-9603

Dedicated  
to my grandfathers

Sri V. Krishnaswamy Sarma (1908–1979),  
whose presence I knew only through the stories shared,  
yet whose guiding light has always felt near

and

Sri S. Krishnaswamy (1908–2009),  
whose quiet blessings and unwavering support gave me  
the courage to take my first steps  
into the unknown world of entrepreneurship.

I wish you were both here to read these pages.  
With deepest respect, I carry your memories always.

# Contents

|                                        |       |     |
|----------------------------------------|-------|-----|
| Why this book, Why now?                | ..... | 9   |
| <b>A. The Foundation</b>               |       |     |
| 1. Making the Founder Leap             | ..... | 15  |
| 2. Learning from Lost Bets             | ..... | 21  |
| 3. Guiding People Through Change       | ..... | 26  |
| 4. The Currency Called Trust           | ..... | 30  |
| 5. Look Beyond the Degree              | ..... | 34  |
| 6. Founders Must Write                 | ..... | 38  |
| <b>B. Growth</b>                       |       |     |
| 7. The Six Pillars of Strategic Growth | ..... | 45  |
| 8. Focused Founders Win                | ..... | 52  |
| 9. The Patient Flytrap Strategy        | ..... | 56  |
| 10. Build Like a Politician            | ..... | 61  |
| 11. Your Authentic Pitch               | ..... | 67  |
| 12. Thriving Without Search            | ..... | 72  |
| 13. The Best Time is Now               | ..... | 78  |
| 14. Learning from Legends              | ..... | 83  |
| <b>C. People</b>                       |       |     |
| 15. The Art of Hiring Giants           | ..... | 89  |
| 16. Making Remote Teams Connect        | ..... | 94  |
| 17. Engaging the Next Generation       | ..... | 98  |
| 18. Every CEO Needs a Mentor           | ..... | 103 |

|                                      |       |     |
|--------------------------------------|-------|-----|
| 19. Coffee Chats Corridor Leadership | ..... | 109 |
| 20. Beyond the Big Meeting           | ..... | 114 |
| 21. Deciding Under Pressure          | ..... | 119 |
| 22. Well-being is the strategy       | ..... | 122 |

#### **D. Execution**

|                                  |       |     |
|----------------------------------|-------|-----|
| 23. Innovation Starts with Users | ..... | 129 |
| 24. When to Incorporate          | ..... | 134 |
| 25. The Wisdom of the Premortem  | ..... | 140 |
| 26. The Power of Great Support   | ..... | 146 |
| 27. Learning from Outages        | ..... | 152 |
| 28. The Open Source Advantage    | ..... | 158 |

#### **E. Future with AI**

|                                   |       |     |
|-----------------------------------|-------|-----|
| 29. AI Your Presentation Partner  | ..... | 167 |
| 30. AI changes Everything Digital | ..... | 172 |
| 31. AI Powering Sales Growth      | ..... | 176 |
| 32. Taming the AI Jungle          | ..... | 179 |
| 33. Guard Against AI Risks        | ..... | 184 |
| 34. The Value of Human Touch      | ..... | 188 |
| 35. Responsible AI                | ..... | 193 |

|                       |       |     |
|-----------------------|-------|-----|
| The Journey Continues | ..... | 198 |
| Further Reading       | ..... | 201 |



## A. THE FOUNDATION

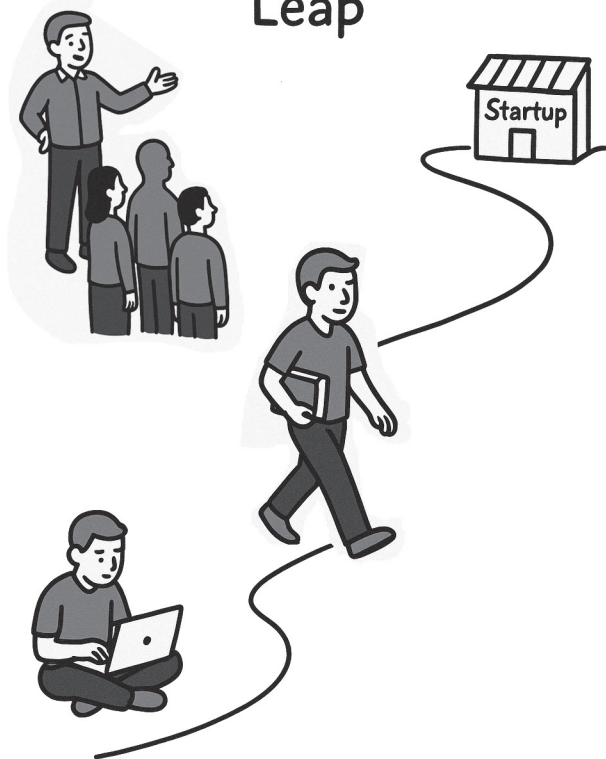
Every great building starts with a solid foundation. For a founder, that foundation isn't concrete and steel; it's mindset, self-awareness, and the courage to take the first step. It is about understanding who you are, what drives you, and how you learn from the inevitable twists and turns of the entrepreneurial road. Before you build your company, you must first build yourself. This section explores that essential groundwork—the bedrock principles that shape a leader capable of navigating the demanding, yet rewarding, journey from initial idea to lasting impact.

# 1

## Making the Founder Leap

My own journey into the world of business wasn't planned with a spreadsheet or a grand strategy; it began quietly, rooted in the lessons learned growing up in Chennai. Surrounded by the quiet discipline of my family's publishing business, started by my grandfather in 1929, I absorbed the values of integrity and the ingredients necessary to build something meant to last. Even as an engineering student, solving problems with code felt natural, but the pull towards creating something entirely new, something mine, was undeniable. The transition from engineer to entrepreneur wasn't a single event, but a gradual unfolding, a series of small leaps that taught me leadership is learned, not innate, and often discovered far outside the comfort zone of code.

# Making the Founder Leap



Like many who start with a technical background, my initial focus was entirely on the ‘what’ – the product, the solution, the elegant code. But building custom software for clients while still in college gave me a taste of solving real-world problems. The early success of my first shareware product, EasyPass—which found buyers in over fifty countries—showed me that I could create something that reached people far beyond my immediate world.

But that early win came with a sharp lesson. One of my first collaborators copied the codebase and began selling a version of it under his own name—without my knowledge. It was my first real experience of how closely success and setbacks can follow each other. It reminded me that setbacks are part of the founder’s path from day one.

Then came a decisive turn: Microsoft approached us for software services based on our early web work. Over the next fifteen years, what began as a small IT services venture grew into a global business, serving clients across continents, employing hundreds of people across three countries—and bringing with it a whole new set of challenges.

This growth forced me to confront a reality I hadn’t anticipated: building a company requires a different skillset than building software. Suddenly, the ‘how’ – how to lead people, how to build trust, how to make decisions with incomplete information – became paramount. It required stepping back from the immediate problem, the specific line of code, and seeing the larger ecosystem of people, processes, and market dynamics. This shift from a purely technical

mindset to a leadership perspective was, frankly, uncomfortable at times. The engineer in me wanted control, precision, predictable outcomes. The nascent entrepreneur had to embrace ambiguity, trust others, and learn to delegate – often to people more experienced than myself.

One of the most crucial lessons during this transition was the power of curiosity extending beyond technology. I realised I couldn't rely solely on my engineering background. I started actively seeking advice from mentors, peers, clients – anyone who offered a different viewpoint. Reading books on management, like Louis Gerstner's account of IBM's turnaround or Jack Welch's experiences at GE, opened my eyes. They challenged my early assumption that management was somehow less important than technical skill. These diverse inputs helped me avoid the tunnel vision that can easily afflict founders deeply immersed in their product.

Another critical part of the leap was understanding that integrity isn't just a personal value, but a business foundation. Growing up seeing my father run the family business with quiet discipline taught me this early on. In my own ventures, ensuring salaries were always paid on time, and maintaining a clean slate with vendors, banks, and governments across all countries we operated in, became a non-negotiable principle. This isn't something you boast about in marketing material, but it's the bedrock that allows everything else to stand firm, especially during challenging times. It builds trust internally and externally, which is far more valuable than any single deal or technical breakthrough.

Learning to lead people older and more experienced than myself was one of the most humbling parts of my journey. When I began hiring project managers nearly twice my age, I had to set aside my urge to always be the expert and instead trust their experience. I remember two managers, Mr M and Mr G, who worked with me for years. No matter how complex the project, I could rely on them to handle it smoothly. Without their steady hands in those early days, we simply could not have scaled our operations as we did. My role shifted from solving every problem myself to becoming the orchestrator—setting the vision, removing obstacles, and creating an environment where talented people like them could do their best work. Letting go of the need to have all the answers was not easy, but it was essential for building a team that could grow beyond my own limitations.

Interestingly, while this shift in mindset was deeply personal, research supports why it matters. For founders wondering whether to hand over the reins too early to a professional CEO, the evidence offers quiet reassurance: staying true to your entrepreneurial instincts can be a strategic advantage.

A Wharton study by Lee, Kim, and Bae (2016), which analysed over 8,800 firm-year observations across S&P 500 companies, found that founder-CEOs delivered significantly more breakthrough innovations than their professional successors. Most importantly, this innovation translated into stronger financial performance—not just more patents, but greater long-term value creation. It's a reminder that

even as you learn to delegate and let go, there's real value in staying close to the original spark that started it all.

Founders often wonder when to make the leap. So, if you're watching the rise of AI, the funding slowdown, and the churn in global markets, and questioning whether this is the right time to begin—remember this: these very headwinds often accelerate growth. Not just as a founder, but as a CEO in the making.



**Reflection:** Maturing from founder to CEO isn't about giving up your technical roots—it's about rising above them. It means shifting from hands-on execution to long-term vision, from solving problems to enabling others to solve them. The journey begins with building products, but it truly matters when you start building people, systems, and culture that can outlast you.



## E. FUTURE WITH AI

Technology, particularly the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence, isn't just changing how we do business; it's fundamentally reshaping what business is possible. Navigating this dynamic landscape requires more than simply adopting the latest tools or chasing trends. It demands strategic foresight, a clear understanding of both the immense potential and the inherent risks, a commitment to ethical principles, and a vision for how technology can serve human goals. This final section explores the frontiers of digital transformation, the role of AI, the importance of the human element amidst automation, and the practical considerations for leading confidently into an uncertain but opportunity-rich future.

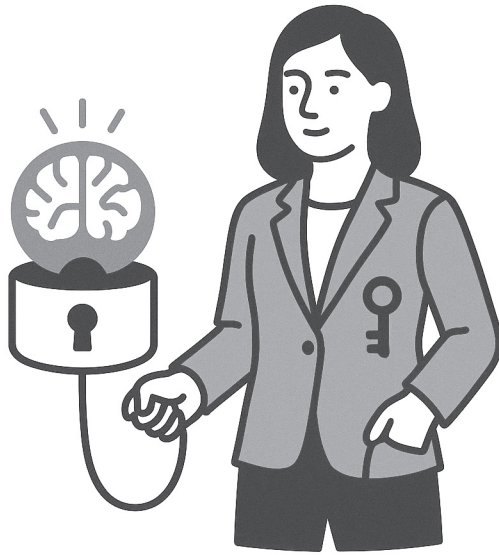
# 35

## Responsible AI

Even in science fiction, like the popular Star Trek television series depicting explorations in space, the most advanced technology requires human judgement. Consider the sentient ship's computer, Zora, in Star Trek: Discovery. Despite Zora's vast analytical power, the captain and crew must always weigh its logical outputs against their understanding of complex situations, potential consequences, and guiding values. This highlights a crucial point for us building technology today: when should we rely solely on artificial intelligence? A good starting point for any AI project is asking if we can achieve the goal effectively “without” using AI. This simple check ensures we use AI thoughtfully, ideally to enhance human capabilities, not replace human judgement, especially where empathy or nuanced ethical decisions are needed. Human oversight remains vital.

The challenge is that AI development often moves faster than the ethical guidelines needed to manage it. This puts the responsibility squarely on us, the creators, to build ethical considerations into our work from the very beginning. A useful concept here is the Minimum Ethical Product, or MEP. We are all familiar with the Minimum Viable Product (MVP), focused on getting core functionality out quickly. An MEP, however, prioritises embedding fairness, transparency, accountability, and equity right from the initial design. This might mean delaying some features or accepting slightly lower performance initially, but it builds a much stronger foundation of user trust and long-term success. Trying to add ethics later is far less effective. Startups, often less burdened by legacy systems, have a golden opportunity to embed these principles deeply into their culture from day one.

When designed thoughtfully, AI can be incredibly empowering. Look at Khanmigo, the AI guide from Khan Academy. It personalises the learning pace for students but relies on human educators for the core teaching and direction. Another fine example is Microsoft's Seeing AI app, which uses AI to assist visually impaired individuals, significantly enhancing their independence. Think also of DeepMind's AlphaFold, which made breakthroughs in predicting protein structures – work relevant to Nobel Prize-winning research. AlphaFold accelerates discovery, supporting scientists rather than replacing their expertise in complex fields. These examples show AI's positive potential when focused on augmenting human abilities responsibly.



Indeed, the most successful and sustainable AI applications often manage to align values across three key groups: the person interacting with the system, the creators of the system, and society at large. Consider the widespread adoption of GPS navigation systems. They provide immense value to the user (directions, traffic avoidance), benefit the creators (mapping companies, app developers), and contribute positively to society (improved traffic flow, potentially increased safety). Aiming for this alignment is a worthy goal.

However, the path isn't always simple. We often face ethical dilemmas where every choice involves difficult trade-offs. During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, there was discussion about using AI tools to allocate scarce resources like ventilators. While potentially efficient on paper, relying solely on algorithms for such life-and-

death decisions raised serious concerns. These algorithms inherently lack the empathy and nuanced understanding required for fair distribution in such high-stakes situations, again underscoring the need for human involvement.

Bias in AI remains one of the most significant ethical challenges. AI models learn from the data they are trained on. If that data reflects existing societal biases, the AI will inevitably learn and perpetuate those biases. We have seen this clearly in recruitment tools that ended up favouring certain demographic groups, or facial recognition systems that performed poorly for people with darker skin tones. Addressing this requires constant vigilance. We need diverse development teams who can spot potential blind spots. We must carefully audit training data, implement fairness-aware algorithms, test thoroughly across different user groups, and establish clear processes for addressing bias when it is discovered. In a diverse country like India, with its complex societal fabric, the risk of biased AI causing harm is substantial, making this diligence absolutely critical.

Furthermore, we must remember that ethical norms can differ across cultures. What is considered fair or acceptable user data handling in one country might be viewed very differently elsewhere. Developing AI systems for global use demands sensitivity to these local contexts. A one-size-fits-all approach to AI ethics rarely works; adaptation and consideration of local values are essential.

Building ethically sound AI requires concrete actions, not just good intentions. This means establishing clear ethical

guidelines within our organisations, defining our principles for responsible AI development, and implementing robust governance processes to review projects for ethical risks throughout their lifecycle. Prioritising transparency and explainability, making AI decision-making understandable wherever feasible, is key. And naturally, strict adherence to data privacy regulations and best practices is non-negotiable.



**Reflection:** Integrating ethics into AI development is not an optional extra; it is fundamental for building trust and creating sustainable value. We must proactively embed principles of fairness, transparency, accountability, and human oversight to ensure technology truly serves humanity's best interests.

## About the Author

If you have journeyed through this book, perhaps you already feel you know a bit about me from the stories and reflections shared. For those curious about the path that led to these pages, let me offer a little more background – not just the titles, but the experiences that shaped the lessons within.

My life in technology and entrepreneurship spans nearly three decades now. It began not in a boardroom, but in Chennai, within a family where running a business was simply a way of life. My grandfather established a publishing house back in 1929, an enterprise my father guided for over fifty years. Growing up surrounded by books, the hum of printing presses, and the quiet integrity required to sustain a business left a deep impression. Even then, the idea of building something from nothing, something lasting, held a powerful fascination.

Technology captured my interest early on. While pursuing my engineering degree, I was already taking on freelance projects, writing software for local clients. These initial experiences were invaluable; they taught me the practical art of solving real problems for real people and gave me the confidence to venture out on my own. My first independent venture focused on software products, including a shareware security app called EasyPass that surprisingly found users from around the world—an early lesson in global reach.

A pivotal moment came when Microsoft India, seeing our early web development work, invited us to build software services for their India MSN portal. This marked the beginning of my IT services journey. In 1996, I founded Vishwak Solutions with little more than a single computer and a determination to use technology thoughtfully. Over the next fifteen years, we grew into a multi-million dollar company with offices in India, the USA, and the UK, serving clients including Fortune 100 brands. Along the way, I've worn nearly every hat imaginable – founder, CEO, coder, server troubleshooter at midnight, financier, marketer, salesman, coffee maker and mentor.

Throughout this journey, I've always believed in staying hands-on, learning continuously, and sharing what I learn – often through my long-running blog at [venkatarangan.com](http://venkatarangan.com). I've had the honour of serving as an honorary Microsoft Regional Director since 1999 and as an IEEE Senior Member, roles that have provided a front-row seat to technological evolution globally. I've spoken at conferences, mentored startups (including through the Microsoft for Startups program), and advised numerous founders, always finding that each interaction teaches me something new.

My fascination with technology's potential led me to explore areas like mobile computing early on – predicting its rise as the primary computer in developing regions back in 2003 – and later to develop a patent-pending predictive news app driven by machine learning. Today, my focus often centres on the practical application of Generative AI and Large Language Models (LLMs) to solve real business problems and enhance productivity responsibly.

Beyond Vishwak, I co-founded Docu3C, a fintech startup, leveraging Azure AI. I remain involved in initiatives like advising the Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam International Foundation

and supporting the Tamil Virtual Academy's efforts in digital libraries and Tamil computing. Writing continues to be a passion, with my recent Tamil book on consumer technology, "Nutpam" receiving appreciation.

If I were to distill my core business philosophy, it would be simple: always strive to do the right thing, especially when no one is watching. Looking back, one of my proudest achievements is the simple fact that throughout the years, salaries were consistently paid on time, and we maintained a clean record with all stakeholders – employees, vendors, banks, and governments. This commitment to integrity is the foundation upon which lasting businesses are built.

This book is a distillation of lessons learned – often the hard way – across this varied journey. It's not offered as a rigid play-book, but as an honest sharing of experiences, hoping it might provide perspective, spark an idea, or offer some reassurance as you navigate your own unique path in the demanding but rewarding world of entrepreneurship.

Outside of work, I remain an avid reader, traveller and film enthusiast, always curious and open to new ideas.

*Author's Home Page:* [thefoundercatalyst.com](http://thefoundercatalyst.com)

*Email:* [venkatarangan@gmail.com](mailto:venkatarangan@gmail.com)

*Twitter:* [venkatarangan](https://twitter.com/venkatarangan)



*"No jargon.  
No Silicon Valley fairy tales.  
Just honest, hard-won lessons  
from a founder who's seen it all."*

Founder Catalyst is a no-nonsense guide for startup founders who want to become decisive, authentic CEOs — without losing their soul along the way.

In this deeply practical and refreshingly honest book, entrepreneur and mentor Venkatarangan Thirumalai shares lessons he's lived — not just learned — over three decades of building, leading, and advising companies. From early product bets to strategic pivots, from hiring giants to leading remote teams, and from pitching with clarity to navigating the messy, noisy world of AI — this book gives you what most founders wish they'd known earlier.

With stories drawn from his own journey and real-world insights from companies like Microsoft, Airbnb, Tata, Nykaa, and Ogilvy, this is not a book of frameworks. It's a field guide for a founder — and a builder anywhere — ready to lead with humility, clarity, and confidence. Whether you're shipping your first product or scaling toward your next milestone, Founder Catalyst is the companion that keeps you grounded, focused, and ready for what's next.

₹399

