01

THE APPROVAL PILEUP

Finished work is sitting in a queue with your name on it, and nothing moves until you say so.

DEPENDENCY TYPE DIRECTION & DECISION DEPENDENCY

HOW IT SOUNDS "THEY CHECK WITH ME BEFORE DECIDING OR MOVING FORWARD."

TIME TO FIRST RELIEF ONE DECISION MEMO, SENT THIS WEEK

FIRE DANGER — HOW FAST THIS ONE COMPOUNDS

SLOW BURN | STEADY | **FAST** | FIVE ALARM

1.1 THE SCENE

It's 9:40 on a Tuesday morning and you haven't done any of your own work yet.

You've been awake and working since seven. But what you've been doing is answering. Your ops lead needs to know if she can approve a refund. Your designer wants sign-off on the sales page header before it goes live. Your assistant is asking whether to book the podcast interview for the 14th or push it. A contractor invoice is sitting in your inbox with a note: “OK to pay?”

None of these are hard questions. That's what gets you. Each one takes ninety seconds, and each one is something a competent adult could decide — and you hired competent adults. But the questions keep coming, because in your company, deciding without you feels risky and asking you feels safe. So everything routes through you: the five-dollar calls and the five-thousand-dollar calls, formatted identically, arriving in the same inbox.

Meanwhile, the finished work waits. The email sequence your team wrapped on Friday is still sitting in drafts because you haven't “taken a look.” The proposal is done but unsent. Somebody's whole Wednesday depends on an answer you haven't given because you were on a client call, and now they've moved on to something else, and the momentum they had is gone.

And the pileup travels. You tried taking four days off in the spring — remember how that went. The first two days were “so sorry to bother you on vacation, quick one” messages, and you came home to a queue deep enough to erase the trip. Your team wasn't being needy. They were being obedient — to a structure that says nothing is real until you've blessed it.

You get to your own work around 3pm, if it's a good day. And at some point — maybe on a Sunday night, clearing the queue so your team can move on Monday — it hits you that you've become the toll booth on every road in your own company.

YOU KNOW THIS FIRE IS BURNING WHEN

- Your mornings start with a queue of “quick questions” that are really requests for permission.
- Finished work sits for days waiting on your review, then you approve it in four minutes with no changes.
- Team members preface decisions with “just wanted to check before I…” on things well inside their job.

- You come back from two days away to a backlog of stalled decisions, not a backlog of problems.
- People bring you options instead of recommendations — they've done the thinking but won't commit to it.
- The same category of question keeps arriving no matter how many times you've answered it.
- You clear approvals at night or on weekends so your team isn't blocked the next day.
- You've caught yourself thinking, “why are they asking me this?” more than once this week.

1.2 WHAT'S ACTUALLY BURNING

This fire wears a people costume. It looks like a team that won't step up, can't handle authority, or lacks confidence. Plenty of founders in your position quietly conclude they've hired timid people — and some go on to replace good team members over it, then watch the new hires start asking the same questions within a month.

30 SEC	0	1
WHAT ASKING COSTS YOUR TEAM	DECISIONS WRITTEN DOWN ANYWHERE	DESK EVERY DECISION WAITS ON

That should tell you where the fire really lives. When every person who enters your company develops the same behavior, the behavior is coming from the structure, not the people.

What's burning underneath is Direction & Decision Dependency: decisions in your business cannot happen without your judgment, because your judgment is the only decision system the company has. Nobody defined what a team member can decide alone. Nobody set a dollar threshold, an impact threshold, or an escalation rule. Nobody wrote down the principles you use to make the gray-area calls. So your team is doing exactly what smart people do inside an undefined system: they escalate everything, because escalating is the only move that can't get them in trouble.

Look at it from their side. If your designer publishes the page and you would have wanted a change, she made a mistake. If she asks first, she's safe. You have never once punished asking. You have absolutely winced at deciding — maybe just a flicker across your face on a Zoom call, but they caught it. The math from where they sit is obvious. Asking costs them thirty seconds. Deciding could cost them your trust. They will choose the queue every single time, and they're right to, until you change the math.

FIRE WATCH

The trap is reading escalation as incompetence. The moment you decide “they just can't handle it,” you grip tighter — more review, more check-ins, more sign-offs — and tighter grip produces more escalation, which reads as more incompetence. That loop has cost founders entire teams. Your people aren't failing a test. Nobody ever wrote the test.

This is also why “empower your team” advice bounces off. You've probably already told your people to use their judgment — maybe several times, sincerely. But permission delivered as a vibe evaporates the first time someone can't tell whether this decision is the kind you meant. Authority only holds when it's specific: written thresholds, named owners, defined escalation. A team can't act on “use your judgment.” They can act on “refunds under $500 are yours.”

Before we fix it, price it. Decision latency is a tax on everything: every project moves at the speed of your response time, which means the whole business runs at the speed of your calendar. And there's a quieter cost. Your strongest people feel the queue the most — the ones with real ownership instincts are exactly the ones who hate waiting for permission, and they're the first to go find a company that lets them decide. The approval pileup slows the work this quarter and quietly sorts your team over the years, and it sorts the deciders out first.

Your team isn't slow. Your approval line is.

FOUNDER FIRE CODES™

1.3 THE RESPONSE PLAN

Put it out this week.

1	2	3	4	5	6
PULL 20 APPROVALS	SORT 3 BUCKETS	WRITE THE MEMO	SEND IT OUT LOUD	REDIRECT 2 WEEKS	HOLD THE LINE

1 PULL YOUR LAST TWENTY APPROVALS

Open Slack, email, and your project tool, and collect the last twenty things you approved, decided, or signed off on. Don't sort yet, just gather. This takes fifteen minutes and it is the highest-leverage fifteen minutes in this playbook, because everything else gets built from real requests instead of your memory of them. Founders remember the big approvals. The queue is made of small ones.

2 SORT THEM INTO THREE BUCKETS

For each of the twenty, ask one question: did this genuinely need my judgment? You'll get three piles. **Bucket A:** never needed you — the asker knew the answer and wanted cover. **Bucket B:** needed a rule, not a person — a threshold or policy would have answered it. **Bucket C:** genuinely needed you — novel, high-stakes, or strategic. For scale: a refund inside your stated policy is A. The third invoice this month from the same contractor is B — a rule answers it. Whether to keep working with that contractor at all is C. In most founder-run businesses, bucket C is the smallest pile by a wide margin. Whatever your split is, write it down. That ratio is your before picture.

3 WRITE THE DECISION MEMO

One page. It converts buckets A and B into standing authority. Set a spending threshold, an impact threshold, and three to five named decision areas that no longer come to you. Use real numbers from your real approvals — if the refunds you've been approving are all under $400, your threshold is $500, not a round number you picked to feel generous. A starting structure:

DECISION	WHOSE CALL	COMES TO ME ONLY WHEN
Spending under $500	The person who owns the budget line	It's recurring and new, or off-budget
Refunds under $500	Ops lead	Client threatens a dispute or legal action
Scheduling & calendar moves	Assistant	It touches a launch date or a paid engagement
Publishing approved-format content	Marketing lead	It contains a new claim, price, or offer
Client deliverable revisions, round one	Delivery lead	Scope changes or the client escalates

4 SEND IT, OUT LOUD

Don't slide this into a folder. Present it live — team meeting or a recorded video — because your team needs to watch you mean it.

> **SAY THIS TO YOUR TEAM**
>
> *"I owe you an apology and a memo. You've been asking me for permission on things you're fully capable of deciding, and that's my fault — I never defined what's yours to call. As of today, that changes. This memo lists the decisions that are now yours. Inside these lines, you don't need me, you don't need to loop me in first, and you will not get in trouble for a judgment call that doesn't go perfectly. If a decision goes sideways, we'll fix the rule together — not relitigate your judgment. Outside these lines, bring it to me fast, and I'll be actually available because I'm not buried in everything else."*

5 REDIRECT FOR TWO WEEKS

The memo doesn't kill the habit; your responses do. For the next two weeks, when a question arrives that the memo already covers, don't answer the question — answer with the rule.

> **WHEN THE OLD QUESTIONS KEEP COMING**
>
> *"Good news — that one's yours now. Check the decision memo. Whatever you decide, I'm behind it."*

Every time you just answer the question because it's faster, you teach the team the memo was decoration. Two weeks of consistent redirects is what installs it. Yes, it will feel slower for those two weeks. It's the last slow you're buying.

One more redirect discipline: do it in public where you can. A redirect delivered in a DM trains one person; the same redirect in the team channel trains everybody watching, including the three people who were drafting their own permission requests. The habit you're breaking is collective, so break it in front of the collective.

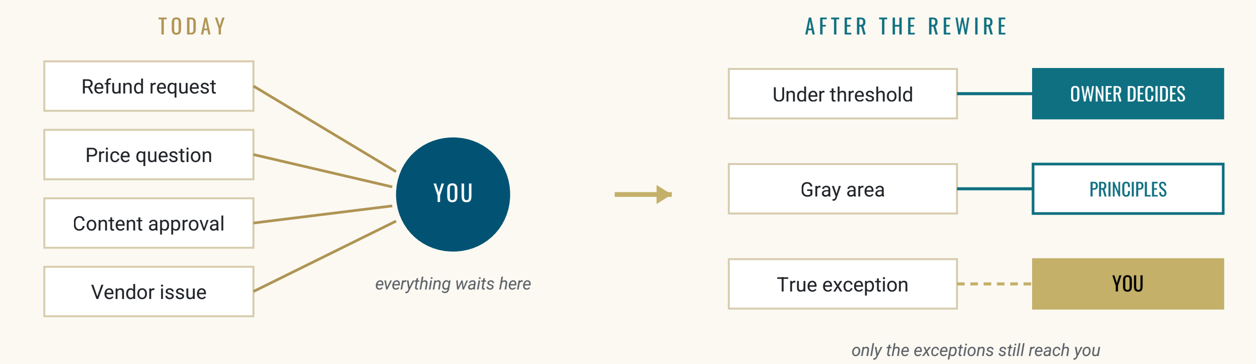
6 HOLD THE LINE ON THE FIRST BAD CALL

Within a few weeks, someone will use their new authority and get it wrong. This moment decides whether the fire stays out. If you snatch the authority back, you've told the whole team the memo was a trap, and the queue re-forms by Friday — longer than before, because now they know deciding really does get punished. Instead, treat the miss as data about the rule: was the threshold wrong, the escalation criteria unclear, the example missing? Fix the memo, thank the person for deciding, and move on. One bad $300 call is the tuition for a team that decides. You've paid more for less.

1.4 THE PREVENTION PLAN

Rewire it so it stops coming back.

THE REWIRE — THE QUEUE, BEFORE AND AFTER



Four decision streams, one desk — versus thresholds and principles doing the routing for you.

The response plan bought you relief. Prevention means replacing your judgment with decision architecture — structure that lets people decide the way you would, without you in the room. Three pieces, installed over two weeks.

PIECE ONE: DECISION RIGHTS BY ROLE

The memo covered the top of the queue. Now go role by role: for each seat on your team, define what that seat owns outright, what it recommends, and what it escalates. This is the difference between a threshold list and an architecture — thresholds cover categories, decision rights cover people.

ROLE	DECIDES ALONE	RECOMMENDS, THEN DECIDES	ESCALATES
Ops lead	Vendor issues, refunds in policy, tool settings, process tweaks	New tools under $200/mo, policy changes	Anything legal, anything over threshold, team conflicts
Marketing lead	Content calendar, publishing in approved formats, minor copy edits	New campaign angles, partnerships	Pricing, new offers, brand position changes
Delivery lead	Session scheduling, first-round revisions, client communications in policy	Scope adjustments, timeline extensions	Scope changes with revenue impact, at-risk clients

Build yours with each person in the room. When people help draw their own lines, they defend them.

PIECE TWO: ESCALATION CRITERIA THAT DESCRIBE SITUATIONS, NOT FEELINGS

“Escalate when it's important” routes everything back to you, because to a careful person everything feels important. Escalation criteria have to name observable conditions: a dollar figure, a client saying a specific kind of thing, a deadline at risk by more than a defined margin, anything involving a contract. If your team can't tell from the words alone whether a situation qualifies, the criterion isn't written yet — it's still living in your head, which means the decision still lives there too.

PIECE THREE: WRITTEN OPERATING PRINCIPLES

Thresholds handle the countable decisions. Principles handle the gray. These are the five to seven rules you actually use when you make a close call — and you already have them, you've just never written them down. To extract them, look at your last five gray-area decisions and ask what you were weighing. You'll find things like: “When a client is upset, we solve first and assign cost later.” “We never ship on a date we'd have to apologize for.” “When in doubt, protect the relationship over the invoice.” Written principles are how your team decides gray areas the way you would — which is the whole game, because gray areas are the decisions that used to have no home but your desk.

If you've built a Whole-Picture Handoff™ before, you'll recognize this as the Judgment layer — what the receiver decides alone, what escalates, and how to think about the gray. Decision architecture is that layer, installed company-wide instead of one handoff at a time.

PIECE FOUR: THE DECISION LOG

New authority needs a paper trail — for your team's confidence, not your surveillance. Every threshold-level decision gets one line in a shared log: what was decided, by whom, what it touched. Ten seconds per entry. The log does three jobs. It shows you patterns without hovering — if refunds keep clustering around one offer, that's product intel, not a people problem. It gives your quarterly review real material instead of memory. And it builds your team's case to themselves: six weeks of logged calls that turned out fine is how a careful team learns, on evidence, that deciding is safe here.

KEEP IT ALIVE

Put a thirty-minute review on the calendar once a quarter: raise thresholds that proved too timid, clarify criteria that got debated, add a principle if a new pattern showed up. A decision memo nobody revisits drifts back into folklore within a year. The review itself should run off the decision log, and your team should bring the proposed changes — they're the ones living inside the thresholds daily, so they know where the lines pinch. When the team starts proposing their own authority expansions with evidence attached, the architecture has fully taken; that's the sound of a company that decides.

> ★ **FIRE MARSHAL'S NOTE**
>
> Set your first thresholds lower than feels brave. You can raise a threshold in one sentence next month; clawing back authority you handed out too fast costs trust you can't memo back.

1.5 MAKE IT YOURS

Twenty minutes, real numbers, real names. Blanks that stay blank become decisions that come back to you.

FILL IN · SPENDING THRESHOLD

Decisions under $____________________ no longer need me. The person who owns the budget line decides and logs it in ____________________.

FILL IN · REFUND AUTHORITY

Refunds under $____________________ are decided by ____________________ without my involvement. They come to me only when: ____________________.

FILL IN · THE THREE DECISION AREAS I'M RELEASING FIRST

1. ____________________ — now owned by ____________________
2. ____________________ — now owned by ____________________
3. ____________________ — now owned by ____________________

FILL IN · ESCALATION CRITERIA

A decision comes to me when any of these is true: it involves more than $____________________, it touches ____________________, or a client says anything resembling ____________________.

FILL IN · MY FIRST TWO OPERATING PRINCIPLES

Looking at my last five gray-area calls, the rules I was actually using were:

1. ____________________
2. ____________________

FILL IN · THE SEND DATE

The decision memo goes to my team on ____________________, presented live at ____________________.

1.6 PROOF IT'S OUT

You'll know this fire is out when you can check these off from observation, not optimism:

- [ ] The morning permission queue has visibly shrunk — count the “can I” messages this week against three weeks ago.
- [ ] Someone on your team made a threshold-level decision and you found out afterward, in a report, and it was fine.
- [ ] Finished work is shipping without your review touching it — the sequence went out, the proposal went to the client, and you saw them live.
- [ ] At least one bad call happened, the rule got fixed, and the person is still deciding.
- [ ] Questions that do reach you are genuinely yours — novel, strategic, above threshold.
- [ ] You went away for two days and came back to decisions made, not decisions waiting.

WATCH FOR A RELIGHT

- You quietly start “taking a quick look” at things the memo already released. That's the old wiring re-forming, from your side this time.
- A new hire starts routing everything to you because nobody walked them through the decision memo in onboarding. The memo is now part of onboarding.
- “Just wanted to check” messages start creeping back after a tense week. Tension makes teams re-seek cover; re-send the memo and mean it again.

A team that's allowed to decide stops standing in line at your desk.

FIRE 01 · CLOSED

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