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From Overwhelm to Clarity

What 197 founders carry into the room — and why it isn't a time-management problem

By Nima Imani · August 18, 2026 · 9 minute read

Version 1.0 n = 363 people 9 workshop waves March - July 2026

Summary

Founders are the largest group in our dataset — 197 of 363 people — and the group we have listened to longest. Since March we have run five founder rooms under some version of the same promise: from overwhelm to clarity. This paper is what founders wrote on the way in.

Four things hold. This is an early-stage room: about three quarters are pre-revenue, and when they write their main challenge in their own words, money and customers come before any human theme. Overwhelm, for founders, is not hours — it is fragmentation and pace, and they refuse the phrase "decision fatigue" while describing exactly that. Founders name fear

about a third as often as the people who work for them, and it is impossible to tell from the data whether they feel it less or say it less. And underneath the practical asks — strategy, prioritization, a next step — the thing that draws founders to the smaller circles is a place to think that does not feel like performing.

Where this comes from

I coach founders, and I run a weekly founder circle. Every registration form asks a few optional questions. I've been reading them for a year, and this spring I put them side by side. The pattern was clear enough that I wanted to write it down, partly so I stop projecting my own founder experience onto the room.

The limits are real and stated at the end and in the [methodology](#): these are people who chose to sign up for a session with "overwhelm" or "clarity" in the title, mostly in San Francisco, mostly very early. Needs and intentions, not outcomes. Numbers on this page are read live from our findings ledger; the version above tells you which edition you are reading.

1. This is an early-stage room, and money comes first

~75%

Building MVP 53 · Idea/exploring 38 · Launched pre-revenue 37 · Early revenue 23 · Post-revenue 14 · Fundraising 9 · Funded/scaling 7 (of 170 who gave a stage) · n=170

Three quarters of the founders in our rooms are pre-revenue: building an MVP, exploring an idea, or launched without revenue.

15 and 16 of 120

funding/capital 15, customers/GTM/traction 16, co-founder/hiring/team 12 of 120 free-text answers · n=120

When founders write their main challenge in their own words, money and customers come first — often before any human theme.

The first thing worth being honest about is who is here. Almost nobody in our founder rooms is scaling a team. Most are building an MVP, exploring an idea, or launched and pre-revenue. Team sizes, where we asked, were two to five people, or one.

And when we asked founders to write their main challenge in a free box, the human themes did not come first. Money did. Customers did. Finding a co-founder or a CTO did.

"Finding customers." — Founder

"Single point of failure on fundraising, product, and recruiting." — Solo founder

"Finding my co-founder." — Founder

I mention this first because it is easy, in work like mine, to hear the emotional layer and forget the business underneath it. For founders the order is the other way round: business pains with an emotional layer, not the reverse. Any support that skips the fundraising and the customers to get to the feelings will feel, to a founder, like it missed the point.

2. Overwhelm is pace and fragmentation, not hours

5% vs 25 of 73

'decision fatigue' named by 5% of founders (n=141); 'moving fast without creating chaos' picked by 25 of 73 and 'knowing what strategy to choose' by 31 of 73 (OTF) · n=141

Founders almost never call it 'decision fatigue' — but a third pick 'moving fast without creating chaos'. Same load, different word.

Complicates [Bloomberg, 'AI Anxiety Is Fueling Burnout Across Silicon Valley's Tech Workers' \(June 2026\)](#) — Bloomberg documents founders working longer, not less, as AI raises the bar. Our founders describe the same pressure as pace and strategy, not exhaustion.

29 of 120

top free-text challenge, OTF · n=120

Time, focus, and prioritization is the #1 free-text challenge, but people describe fragmentation ('many hats, no filter') — not a shortage of hours.

Confirms [MIT Sloan Management Review, 'When Employees Are Drowning in Change'](#) — Change fatigue framed as an organizational-load problem, not individual resilience.

Here is the contradiction I keep noticing. Offer founders the phrase "decision fatigue" and almost none of them take it — five percent. Offer them "moving fast without creating chaos" and a third pick it. Ask them to describe the challenge in their own words and the most common answer is

about time, focus, and prioritization — but read the sentences and it is never *I need more hours*.

"Too much to build, small team, what to prioritize." — Founder, pre-seed

"Balancing execution speed with strategic clarity while managing multiple product directions simultaneously." — Founder

"Task management. I need to get out of this mode of doing tasks into thinking strategically 3 months ahead. And then going about doing things patiently." — Founder

That last one is a whole arc in three sentences: the pull of tasks, the wish to think ahead, and the word *patiently*, which is the thing the pace does not allow. Founders don't call it fatigue. They call it pace. But the load they are describing is decision load — too many simultaneous open questions, no filter for this week — and that is why a better calendar does not fix it.

The field is starting to see the same thing from outside. Bloomberg's reporting this summer on AI burnout in Silicon Valley describes founders working longer, not less, as AI raises what a small team can ship — one founder sleeping at the office for weeks, another running agents through his kids' soccer practice. The mechanism people are naming is a ratchet: when everyone gets the same tool, the advantage cancels and the higher bar stays. Our founders wrote about that pressure before it had a name. They just called it "moving fast without chaos."

3. What founders don't say

11%

founders (n=141) vs product/eng ICs 33%, in transition 39%; on the identical ROLE form 27% vs 32% · n=141

Founders name fear about one time in nine — roughly a third the rate of the people who work for them.

45%

of 141 founders who answered a pain question; on the identical ROLE form founders name raw uncertainty more than non-founders (55% vs 48%) · n=141

Nearly half of founders name uncertainty or lack of clarity about direction as their hardest thing — the one theme they share with everyone else in the room.

Founders name uncertainty as readily as anyone — nearly half — and on the identical form they name raw uncertainty a little *more* than the people who work for them. What they don't name is fear. About one founder in nine picks "fear or anxiety" as their hardest thing, against roughly a third of individual contributors and people in transition.

I don't know from this data whether founders feel it less or say it less. I know which one I'd bet on. Founders are the person other people's fear gets brought to, and there is rarely a place to put their own. That is not a criticism. It is what the role is built like.

Two things follow. If you design for founders, don't lead with fear language — it won't land on the poster, however present it is in the room. And if you are a founder reading this: the fear you may not be putting on any form is, in our data, one of the most common things in the rooms you sit in.

4. Excited and overwhelmed, in the same person

**Curious 15 · Uncertain 14 ·
Energized 13 · Anxious 13**

OTC founders, pick 2 of 10; Overwhelmed 11, Hopeful 11, Lonely 7, Stuck 7 ·
n=46

Asked to pick two emotions, founders paired an activating one with a heavy one: curious and uncertain, energized and anxious.

When we asked founders to pick two emotions, they picked one of each. Curious and uncertain. Energized and anxious. Hopeful and overwhelmed. Only about three in ten chose only heavy feelings, and "lonely" and "stuck" showed up seven times each unprompted.

I recognize this. I am energized by what I'm building and unsettled by it, most weeks. It is not a state to fix. It is the accurate emotional shape of doing something new under pressure, and programs that only address one half — pure resilience, or pure momentum — under-serve the other.

5. What draws founders to the smaller rooms

16 solo · 21 co-founder

of 49 who answered (OTC); free text repeats 'solo founder with no team', 'single point of failure on fundraising, product, and recruiting' · n=49

Solo founders and co-founders are both in the room; the solo ones describe being the single point of failure on everything.

11 of 19

FIC 'what drew you' answers about community / safe space; 'lonely' picked 7 times as an emotion (OTC); 'loneliness at the top' 4 · n=19

Loneliness is quiet in the structured answers and loud in what draws founders to the smaller circles: safe space and non-performative peer community.

41% yes · 36% maybe

Yes 97, Maybe 84, Not right now 55 of 236; among Yes: group/circle $\approx$ 1:1 > team workshop (20 across all events) · n=236

Coaching interest is real but lukewarm; when founders say yes, they want a group or circle at least as much as one-to-one — and almost nobody asks for a workshop for their team.

Complicates [ManpowerGroup](#) / [Everest Group](#), [The New Talent Equation \(July 2026\)](#) — Only 3% of organizations say their leaders are ready to lead AI-enabled teams — yet the demand for team-level help does not come from the people in our rooms. It has to be brought to leaders, not pulled by them.

Loneliness is quiet in the structured answers. It is loud in what people wrote about why they came to the smaller circles: safe space, non-

performative peer community, "a less performative setting." Solo founders describe being the single point of failure on everything. Co-founders describe co-founder disputes. Both are describing having nobody to think with who is not also inside the problem.

Coaching interest is real but lukewarm — about four in ten say yes, a third say maybe — and when founders say yes, they want a group or a circle at least as much as one-to-one. Almost nobody asks for a workshop for their team; across every event, twenty people did. That is a useful thing to know honestly. The team-level work that ManpowerGroup's data says organizations are least ready for — only three percent say their leaders are prepared to lead AI-enabled teams — is not being pulled by the founders in our rooms. It will have to be brought to them.

6. What this suggests

For founders: the overwhelm you're describing is probably not a scheduling problem, so scheduling fixes will keep disappointing you. It is a load of open decisions and no filter. The most useful hour I see founders spend is not planning — it is deciding, with someone else in the room, what is *enough* this week, and letting the rest go on purpose. The fear you may not be naming is normal in this room. So is being energized at the same time.

For anyone designing for founders: lead with the business — money, customers, strategy — and let the human layer be found, not announced. Use their words: pace, chaos, focus, strategy — not fatigue, not fear. Hold both emotions in the copy. And build the peer part as the product, not the warm-up, and make it explicitly non-performative, because that is the one thing the free text kept asking for.

I'm still working out how much of this is San Francisco and how much is founding. The next waves will help.

7. Limits, and what we will measure next

Founder-only events did not ask role, so the 78 people at the July "Overwhelm to Focus" session are treated as founders and builders from their free text, not from a role field. Stage was asked at four events (n=170), org size at one (n=25). Free-text challenge coding is by keyword. The loneliness finding is directional — consistent, small, and only asked directly once. Emotion was asked with different lists at different events, so the pairs come from one founder wave (n=46). Everything is registration-time, self-selected, San Francisco-heavy.

Next: the five-question core spine on every founder event so waves compare directly; a decision-load module ("how many open decisions are you carrying this week?"); a post-event pulse to see whether people leave with the clarity they came for; and an explicit question about anticipatory pressure — are you more tired from what you've done, or from what might be coming? — to test the ratchet in our own data.

Cite as

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InsightsOut. <https://insightsout.work/research/from-overwhelm-to-clarity.html>

Sources

- Bloomberg — AI Anxiety Is Fueling Burnout Across Silicon Valley's Tech Workers (June 26, 2026)
- ManpowerGroup Talent Solutions / Everest Group — The New Talent Equation: Activating Workforce Confidence at Scale (July 2026)
- MIT Sloan Management Review — When Employees Are Drowning in Change
- InsightsOut — Workshop Questionnaire Themed Findings, August 2026 (internal; aggregated and anonymized)
- Companion papers: [Working Through AI Change](#) · [When Your Role Starts Changing](#)

What changed

- v1.0 · August 2026 · First edition. Founders are 197 of the 363 people in the 9-wave dataset (Mar-Jul 2026); founder-only waves are FIC-OPEN, FIC-AI, OTC, OTF.

This is a living paper. Numbers on this page are read from the InsightsOut findings ledger and reflect the dataset version shown above. Older PDF editions remain available.

Limits

Registration-time answers (needs and intent, not outcomes); self-selected, San Francisco / startup-ecosystem heavy; questionnaire

varied by event so cross-event counts use a conservative theme mapping; role not captured at OTF and FIC.