

From: Kyle Poyar kylepoyar@substack.com
Subject: There is no transition "out of sales" as a founder
Date: March 5, 2025 at 6:51 AM
To: mike@l-spark.com



Forwarded this email? [Subscribe here](#) for more

There is no transition "out of sales" as a founder

A 6-step framework to grow sales as a founder

SETH DEHART
MAR 5 • GUEST POST



READ IN APP ↗

👋 Hi, it's [Kyle Poyar](#) and welcome to [Growth Unhinged](#), my weekly newsletter exploring the hidden playbooks behind the fastest-growing startups.

When I ask founders about their biggest growth mistakes, they almost always bring up early sales decisions. Their first AE was a costly mishire, setting them back 6+ months. They hired a sales leader before they were ready for it. Or they thought they could transition "out of sales" to focus on product.

Thankfully, Seth DeHart is one of the foremost experts on this topic. After successful runs as an early sales leader, he's gone on to advise 80+ B2B startups — including [Typeform](#), [Attio](#), [incident.io](#) and [SuperAnnotate](#) — on this exact journey. He also runs [Founder Led Sales](#), the free platform and community helping 250+ founders up their sales game. Today, Seth shares his six-step framework for nailing founder-led sales.

✓ Subscribed

More resources: [Favorite Maven courses](#) | [Future of GTM series](#) | [Zero to One series](#)

This wouldn't be a post about sales if I didn't mention that to close deals and generate revenue someone at your startup has to actually "do sales."

And as someone who's spent 20 years "doing sales" I'm comfortable saying that much of it sucks. Too much of it is glamorized by sales people with the "man in the arena" quotes, which misses the point that if you haven't done it before the whole idea is extremely intimidating for many of us.

But the harsh truth is that I've yet to see a SaaS startup go the distance without at least one Founder closely focused on revenue. Hopefully after reading this you'll have more confidence that you not only can "do it" but you can make it a core competency of your startup's culture.

It may sound obvious, but if you've been around enough startups you see the same nonsense repeated over and over that you can "just hire someone to do sales" or that "the founder transitions out of sales." No. There is no transition "out of sales." The roles transition, but at least one founder is the steward of revenue for the company. Forever.

What I've learned from working with hundreds of founders is that successful revenue scaling follows a clear progression. The key is knowing exactly where you are in the journey and what to focus on next.

The six phases of the founder-led sales journey



FOUNDER LED SALES - STAGE CHECKLIST

The harsh truth about SaaS startups is that you won't go the distance without at least one founder closely focused on revenue. This guide outlines the proven progression of founder-led sales, validated across hundreds of successful startups. There is no "transition out of sales" - your role will evolve, but as a founder, you'll always be the steward of revenue for your company.

Phase 1: Finding Product Market Fit

This foundational phase validates that customers will pay for your solution through actual purchases, not just positive feedback.

The focus isn't on perfecting your pitch - it's about having real conversations that lead to paying customers.

Success often comes from founders who don't see themselves as salespeople - they have genuine conversations about business problems and value.

Your founder status is a superpower here - use your deep knowledge of the space to attract meaningful conversations.

Phase 4: Making it Predictable

Your "Sales Playbook" becomes crucial here as you create systems that consistently deliver results across your growing team.

You're moving from having good salespeople who can follow your process to building a repeatable, scalable sales machine.

Focus on predictability because you're preparing for more hires.

You need clear goals around KPIs, quota, and compensation, plus a predictable conversion model and pipeline generation process.

Phase 2: Acquiring Customers

With validated product-market fit, this phase focuses on creating a repeatable process for finding and closing customers. While tempting, don't hire salespeople yet - premature hiring almost always fails.

Instead, use your deep market knowledge to attract conversations and document patterns of success.

When prospects explore purchases, there are usually common steps to reach a signed contract.

These steps become your framework for scaling and the foundation for your future sales team.

Phase 5: Multiple Sales Hires

Once your process is predictable, expand the team based on clear evidence that additional salespeople will generate strong ROI.

Don't hire a sales leader yet - their job is to scale hires.

The more successful sales hires you make, the easier it becomes to attract and justify a world-class sales leader.

This phase builds your sales leadership skills through pipeline reviews, forecasting, and team management.

Phase 3: First Sales Hire(s)

This crucial transition isn't just about hiring someone who can sell - it's about transforming your personal success into a system others can follow.

Your first "Sales Pioneer" must have startup experience and be willing to do everything from prospecting to closing while learning your process.

Having a documented process increases success likelihood and attracts better talent.

Consider hiring two Account Executives simultaneously - the competition often accelerates success.

Phase 6: Hiring a Sales Leader

With a proven foundation, you're ready to invest in a Sales Leader to scale your sales force.

The better your foundation, the better the candidates you'll attract.

Remember, the average Sales Leader tenure is 18 months - you need to maintain enough sales leadership skills to step in if needed.

This isn't about removing yourself from sales - it's about bringing in dedicated leadership to take your successful foundation to the next level.

Check out the [Founder Led Sales community](#) for more checklists and resources

Share

Your journey breaks down into six distinct phases, each building on the foundation of the previous one:

1. Finding early product-market fit (PMF)
2. Acquiring customers
3. The first sales hire(s)
4. Making it predictable
5. Multiple sales hires
6. Hiring a sales leader

Let's dive into each phase and what makes it critical for success. But first, here's a quick framework to identify where you are today.

FOUNDER LED SALES

IDENTIFY YOUR CURRENT STAGE

Check which statements match your current experience. You're likely in the phase where you identify with most items.

Phase 1: Finding Product Market Fit

- Most conversations end with "interesting" but no purchase
- Still testing different pricing approaches
- Regularly changing how you explain your product
- Few or no paying customers yet
- Unclear what makes someone ready to buy
- Spending lots of time explaining what your product does
- Getting mixed feedback on value proposition
- Each sale feels completely different from the last

Phase 2: Acquiring Customers

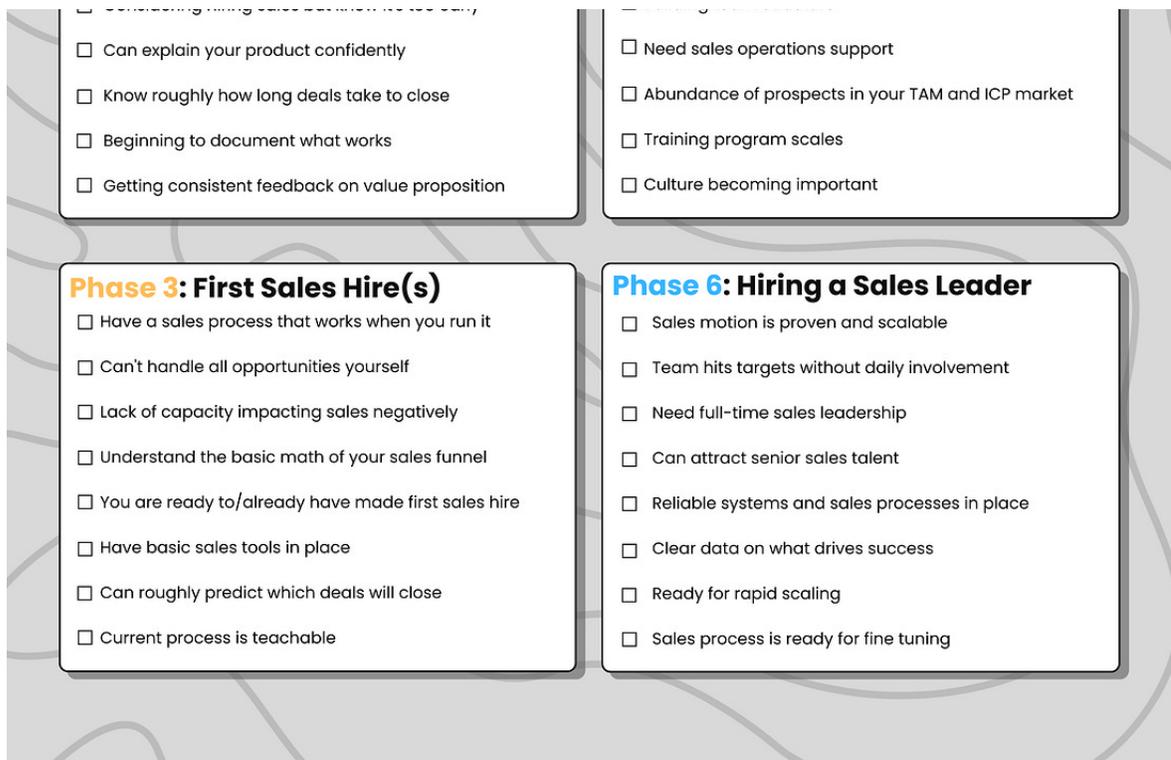
- Have paying customers using your product
- Constructing basic sales materials
- Starting to see patterns in successful deals
- Considering hiring sales but know it's too early

Phase 4: Making it Predictable

- Have 1-2 salespeople closing deals
- Building sales management skills
- Creating forecasting systems
- Developing training programs
- Sales process needs refinement
- Have basic performance metrics
- Sales KPIs becoming more consistent and predictable.
- Ready to expand the team

Phase 5: Scaling Sales Team

- Multiple reps hitting quota
- Onboarding process works
- Pipeline metrics are consistent
- Building team structure



Phase 1: Finding early product-market fit (PMF)

A wise man once said, "The best time to start selling is now." Not sure who that was, but I agree. It can be terrifying and the volume of rejection is brutal, but the market will tell you the truth. Will your prospect exchange money and their time for the value you provide? The only way to know is to put your product and value in front of a prospect's face and see if they bite.

This exercise of "selling" unlocks the truth about whether you have product-market fit (PMF) with the audience you're sharing your product with. Just be mindful that when you're getting started and exploring PMF you need to make a clear distinction about whether you "just want feedback" from your prospect or whether you're asking the prospect if they "want to buy".

While this may feel intimidating, the good news is some of the best

salespeople are the ones who don't see themselves as sales people. They aren't trying to spin some snake oil sales magic, but have real conversations around the prospect's business, their pains/needs and the value the product offers. If you aren't willing to do this as a founder you will fail, this is bare minimum.

 **Tool:** What to do in Phase 1 and when you're ready to transition to Phase 2.



WHAT TO DO AND HOW TO PROCEED: PHASE 1 & 2

Phase 1 – What to do:

Finding Market Truth:

- Schedule and conduct at least 3+ prospect conversations weekly
- Iterate your product/value so that research/feedback conversations are turning into sales conversations.
- Test different price points with various customer segments
- Identify key differences between interested prospects and actual buyers
- Document specific deal-breakers that prevent prospects from purchasing

Learning From Early Customers:

- Collect and document detailed reasons why customers decided to buy
- Track how actively customers are using your product
- Measure and document the specific value customers are getting
- Create detailed success stories based on actual customer results
- Gather feedback about the implementation process of your product/service

Phase 2 – What to do:

Process Development:

- Document complete sales process from first contact to close
- Create consistent value proposition messaging for prospecting to your current ICP
- Build a proposal template that clearly articulates the pricing structure of your service.
- Develop systematic approach to qualifying potential customers
- Establish clear milestones for sales process

Sales Tools Creation:

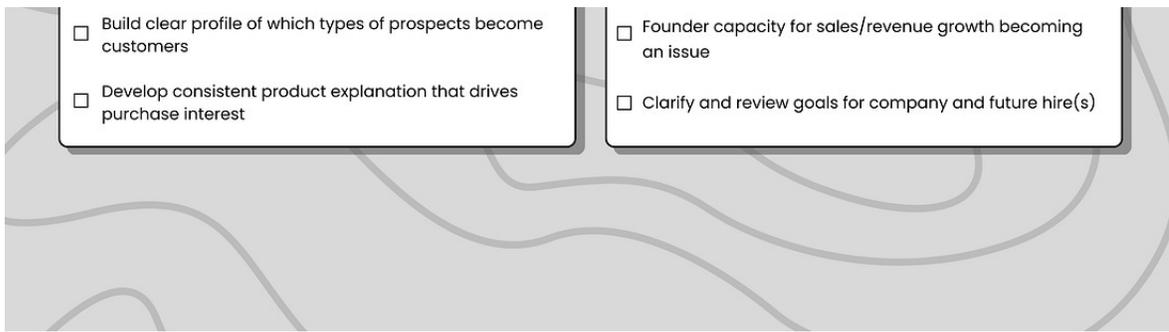
- Create one pager on core value/ that your service or product delivers
- Build case studies from successful customer implementations
- Develop competitor comparison guide for sales conversations
- Document common objections and create effective response guide
- Build presentation demo/deck that effectively communicates product value

Transitioning to Phase 2

- Have minimum of 2-3 customers paying for your product
- Demonstrate clear proof of value delivery to paying customers
- Create repeatable process for successful customer implementation
- Establish pricing model that customers understand and accept
- Document specific triggers that consistently lead to purchases

Transitioning to Phase 3

- Consistently closing new deals per month
- Begin to understand your customer acquisition costs
- Begin creating a sales playbook ready to teach others
- Documented sales process
- Established metrics for qualifying opportunities
- Explore compensation models for sales people at companies with a similar product.



Phase 2: Acquiring customers

This is where founder-led sales really starts to take off. You've validated early PMF with a handful of paying customers and now you want to get more customers. From my experience, you've done the hardest part and now it's about how disciplined you can be to execute these next few steps in the right order to scale.

This phase comes with a huge temptation: hiring your first sales professional. Don't do it. Not yet.

Prematurely hiring sales talent almost always fails and is a waste of time and money. Hiring anyone before the Founder is confident they have a (roughly) repeatable sales process relies on someone else to figure out this critical piece of the sales process and increases risk of failure.

So now you want to speak with prospects and you're in a solid place to attract these conversations because you have what I call the Founder's Super Power: you're dedicating a significant portion of your life to building in this space and talking to prospects. You are the central knowledge repository for the area surrounding your PMF. This should be valuable to prospects and you can use it as a magnet to lure them into conversations.

Think about why we come to Kyle for Growth wisdom from Growth Unhinged - he and his product are the central repository of growth wisdom (and hopefully some sales wisdom after this post!) This is why prospects

(and hopefully some sales wisdom after this post). This is why prospects should be willing to speak with you about your product and gain wisdom from you.

Through your conversations with prospects, you'll start to see patterns. What I learned early in my sales career is that if I could deconstruct these patterns into categories, I could make my process repeatable. When a prospect is interested in exploring a purchase, there are usually some steps required to get to a signed contract. (And remember, the signed contract is just the beginning of the Lifetime Value exchange.)

These steps become your framework for scaling. They emerge from the gnarly, brute-force efforts you've used to acquire your first customers. And when I say brute force - yes! Action! You can't engineer this in a silo or think your way out. It requires pure effort. Even the best make a mess at first but iterate and improve with a larger sample size.

I'm always fascinated by Founders with no sales experience closing deals without realizing they're running a repeatable process. They just get started and DO.

At this point if you can have an experienced sales person audit your process they can help you recognize and formalize what's working.

The act of acquiring customers builds your repeatable sales process. Only when you have this process can you make your first hire. The Founder needs to own this make-or-break moment for the startup. It's tough and you can get help from investors or advisors, but DO NOT rely on someone else to figure this out.

I've joined many startups as an advisor at this moment and this inflection point makes all the difference. Defining "repeatable" isn't always crystal clear, but here's a good test: Could you document the whole process and let someone else run it without your involvement? We're not actually going to do that yet, but it's a solid test of readiness for your first hire.

Phase 3: The first sales hire(s)

The first sales hire(s) or sales pioneer(s) MUST have startup experience and be exclusively focused on selling.

First Sales Hire Evaluation Checklist

What to Look For ✓

- Startup sales experience
- Does own prospecting
- Creates sales processes
- Data-driven and metrics-focused
- Self-starter
- Sold similar products before
- Hits quota consistently
- Great at discovery calls

What to Avoid ✗

- Only big company experience
- Won't prospect
- No process experience
- Needs marketing support
- Wants big support team
- Hates documentation
- Only enterprise deals
- Can't work with founders



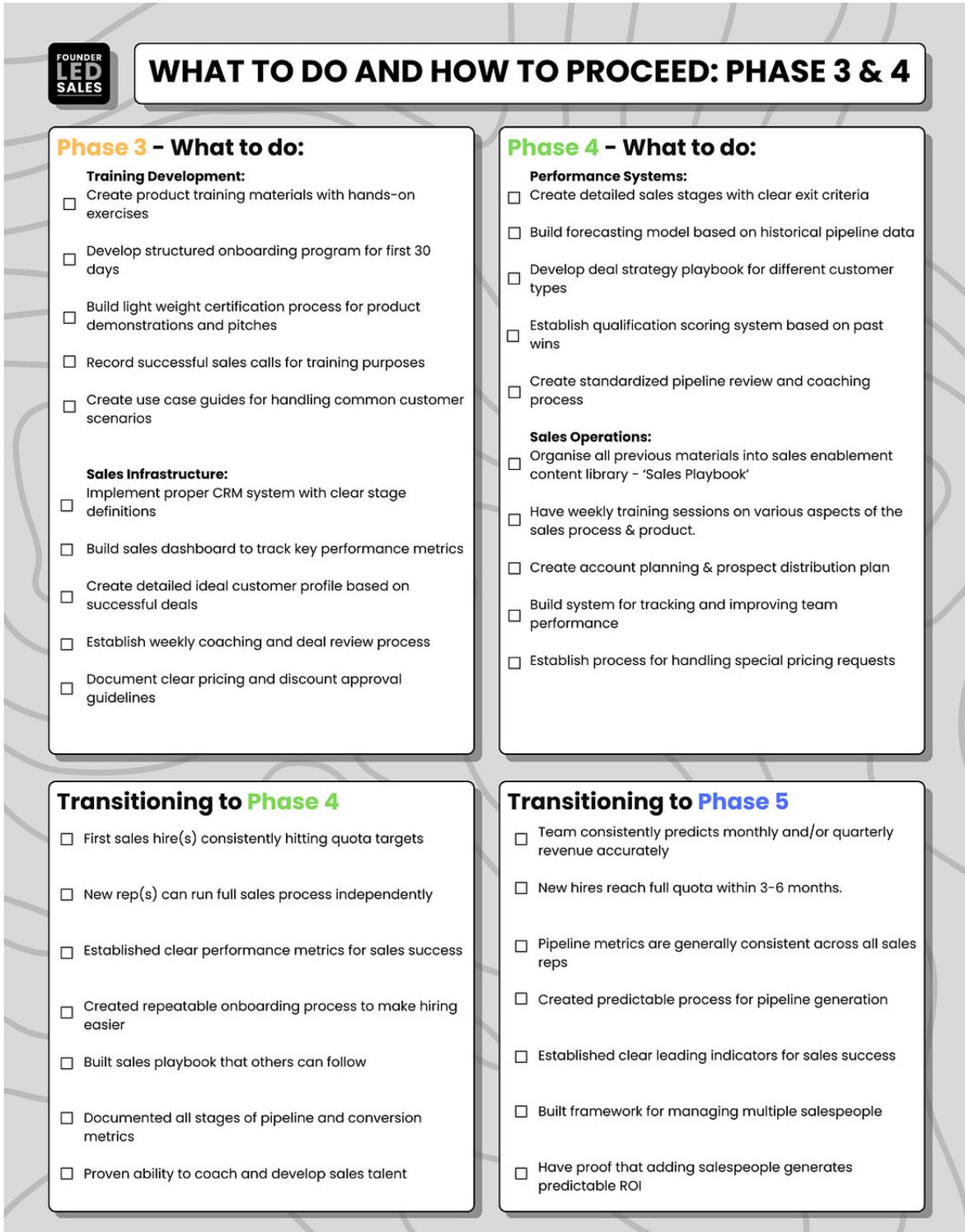
This is a full cycle Account Executive who is willing to roll up their sleeves and do outbound prospecting or lead qualification or any other top of funnel activity while they're learning the repeatable sales process from the Founder.

This is why having that repeatable process is critical — it increases the likelihood of success, enables clear goal setting, and makes it much easier to attract good talent.

Should you hire two Account Executives simultaneously? Yes, if you can find

two great ones. The competition and parallel learning often accelerates success.

 **Tool:** What to do in Phase 3 and when you're ready to transition to Phase 4.



FOUNDER LED SALES

WHAT TO DO AND HOW TO PROCEED: PHASE 3 & 4

Phase 3 - What to do:

Training Development:

- Create product training materials with hands-on exercises
- Develop structured onboarding program for first 30 days
- Build light weight certification process for product demonstrations and pitches
- Record successful sales calls for training purposes
- Create use case guides for handling common customer scenarios

Sales Infrastructure:

- Implement proper CRM system with clear stage definitions
- Build sales dashboard to track key performance metrics
- Create detailed ideal customer profile based on successful deals
- Establish weekly coaching and deal review process
- Document clear pricing and discount approval guidelines

Phase 4 - What to do:

Performance Systems:

- Create detailed sales stages with clear exit criteria
- Build forecasting model based on historical pipeline data
- Develop deal strategy playbook for different customer types
- Establish qualification scoring system based on past wins
- Create standardized pipeline review and coaching process

Sales Operations:

- Organise all previous materials into sales enablement content library - 'Sales Playbook'
- Have weekly training sessions on various aspects of the sales process & product.
- Create account planning & prospect distribution plan
- Build system for tracking and improving team performance
- Establish process for handling special pricing requests

Transitioning to Phase 4

- First sales hire(s) consistently hitting quota targets
- New rep(s) can run full sales process independently
- Established clear performance metrics for sales success
- Created repeatable onboarding process to make hiring easier
- Built sales playbook that others can follow
- Documented all stages of pipeline and conversion metrics
- Proven ability to coach and develop sales talent

Transitioning to Phase 5

- Team consistently predicts monthly and/or quarterly revenue accurately
- New hires reach full quota within 3-6 months.
- Pipeline metrics are generally consistent across all sales reps
- Created predictable process for pipeline generation
- Established clear leading indicators for sales success
- Built framework for managing multiple salespeople
- Have proof that adding salespeople generates predictable ROI



Phase 4: Making it predictable

Now the "sales playbook" becomes an important part of the process. While some documentation should exist already, this is where the pieces come together. The playbook transfers knowledge from you to your AEs who'll need to begin to manage the full sales cycle independently.

You need:

- Clear goals around KPIs, quota, and compensation
- A quantifiably predictable conversion model
- Understanding of how to predictably create pipeline
- A defined ideal customer profile (ICP)
- Clear milestones and sales stages in your CRM

Without these components, adding more team members only creates chaos. We focus so heavily on predictability because we're preparing for more hires. We need confidence they'll succeed.

The hidden benefit? This process teaches you practical sales leadership skills - crucial knowledge to have as your team scales.

Phase 5: Multiple sales hires

Once the process is predictable (not perfect, but predictable), we can expand the team. We need clear math around inputs and outputs from our

first hire(s) to know that additional salespeople will generate strong ROI.

Messing this up is expensive in multiple ways:

- Firing people destroys team momentum
- Keeping underperformers drains resources
- Uncertainty about improvement timeline creates paralysis

And this pain can be avoided if you hold off on growing the team until you make your first sales hire(s) predictably successful.

Am I Ready to **Scale My Sales Team?**

The 8 Critical Questions:

- Do I have predictable monthly revenue from our first hire(s)?
- Is our sales process documented and repeatable?
- Do I know our exact cost to acquire a customer?
- ~~Can I accurately forecast which deals will close?~~
- Do we have enough leads for multiple reps?
- ~~Am I comfortable reading and acting on sales metrics?~~
- ~~Do we have enough cash/runway for multiple salaries?~~
- Is our first hire consistently hitting quota?

We're NOT hiring a sales leader yet because a sales leader's job is to scale hires. The more Sales Hires we make (AEs and SDRs) who are predictably successful the easier it is to both attract and justify the cost of hiring a world class sales leader.

And once we get a skeleton crew of 3+ salespeople successful we can hire a sales leader. But before we get there the founder is solidifying sales

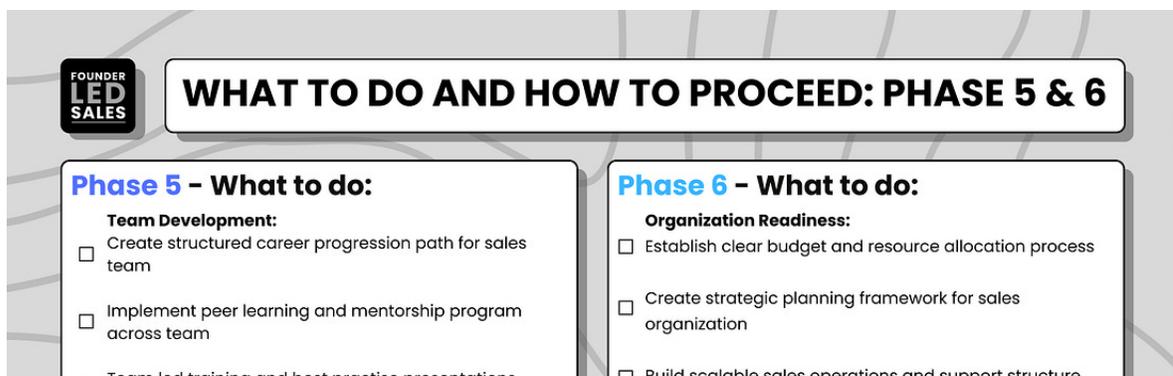
leadership skills that will serve the startup well forever. At this point you're reviewing deals and forecasting what's going to close. You're assessing the funnel metrics from leads through the pipeline. Even a primitive execution on this is wildly educational and insightful.

The reason this is important is that you will likely have to part ways with your first sales leader at some point. Many don't have what it takes to get you to the next inflection point in your business and if they do they may not have what it takes to lead the business after the inflection point. Some also just quit.

The latest data shows that the average time a sales leader will be with you is 18 months. Which means the odds are that at some point the founder will need to step back in and right the ship. If the founder has built up some skills around sales management by managing a small sales team in this phase for even a few months this makes it considerably easier to ensure you can support the sales leader, ensure they're operating at your standards as well as exit them from the business and take the reins if necessary.

Too many founders hurt their startup because they aren't comfortable stepping in and they hold onto an underperforming sales leader for far too long.

 **Tool:** What to do in Phase 5 and when you're ready to transition to Phase 6.



FOUNDER LED SALES

WHAT TO DO AND HOW TO PROCEED: PHASE 5 & 6

Phase 5 - What to do:

Team Development:

- Create structured career progression path for sales team
- Implement peer learning and mentorship program across team
- Team led training and best practice presentations

Phase 6 - What to do:

Organization Readiness:

- Establish clear budget and resource allocation process
- Create strategic planning framework for sales organization
- Build scalable sales operations and support structure

- Learned training and best practice presentations
- Develop specialized training for different product/market segments
- Create team collaboration and knowledge sharing systems

Management Infrastructure:

- Build sales analytics and reporting dashboard
- Lead management systems in place
- Create compensation model tailored to different sales roles
- Establish cross-functional alignment with other departments
- Implement formal performance improvement process

- Build scalable sales operations and support structure
- Develop plans for preserving culture during transition
- Create system for maintaining founder sales involvement

Leadership Preparation:

- Document comprehensive revenue strategy and growth targets
- Create detailed evaluation criteria for sales leadership candidates
- Build transition plan framework for sales leadership handover
- Develop board-level reporting structure and metrics
- Create sales leadership success metrics and KPIs

Managing your Sales Leader Checklist

- Conduct weekly one-on-ones focused on strategic priorities and roadblocks
- Review monthly forecast accuracy and pipeline health across all segments
- Track retention and performance of top-performing sales representatives
- Monitor changes to established sales processes and methodologies
- Verify that new hire onboarding follows proven success patterns
- Watch for unexpected changes to processes that historically worked
- Maintain direct relationships with key enterprise customers and prospects

Transitioning to Phase 6

- Consistently achieving 80% of team at or above quota
- Established clear metrics for evaluating sales leadership
- Demonstrated predictable success with new sales hires
- Built strong sales culture with high team retention
- Confident your sales function is ready sales leadership
- Data validates the business is ready to scale.
- Cross-function confirmation that other business units(Finance, HR, Product etc) are also ready.

Phase 6: Hiring a sales leader

Now we're ready to invest significant resources in a sales leader who will manage the sales force and scale revenue. If you've successfully navigated the previous phases, you're well-positioned to attract great candidates. They're looking for proof they can scale revenue to reach ambitious goals.

The better your foundation, the better the candidates you'll attract. They're

The better your foundation, the better the candidates you'll attract. They're managing career risk and opportunity cost, so they should question everything thoroughly. Your hands-on experience means you can answer their questions and evaluate their plans critically. You want to feel very comfortable that they will make an impact as soon as they join.

Build confidence that they're experience selling and leading really matches exactly what you need. Spend as much time as possible with them prior to making the hire. Some VPs make excellent advisors first — consider this path to test the fit.

Thanks for reading Growth Unhinged! Take a moment to support my work: subscribe, like and share this post.

✓ Subscribed

The truth about founder-led sales

The myth that founders can fully delegate sales is just that — a myth. The most successful SaaS companies I've seen have founders who embrace their role as revenue stewards. They don't run from sales; they master it.

Here's what I'd like you to take away:

- **Start selling now.** Not next quarter, not when you hire someone — now. The market will tell you the truth about your product faster than any other method.
- **The messy process of your first sales contains the DNA of your scalable revenue engine.** Pay attention to what works, document it, and refine it through action.
- **Your founder's super power is real and valuable.** No hired gun can

replicate your deep market knowledge and commitment to solving customer problems.

- **Never outsource the building of your initial sales process.** Get help, get advice, but own the creation of your repeatable sales motion.
- **Build sales leadership muscles early.** The average sales leader tenure is 18 months. You need to be ready to step in when (not if) changes happen.

Most importantly: this journey isn't a sprint to "graduate" from sales. It's about building the foundation of a company where revenue generation is a core competency, not a department.

Start where you are. Master your current phase. The next steps will become clear.

And the good news is that you don't have to figure this out alone. The [founder-led sales community](#) exists specifically to help founders navigate these phases. We've seen hundreds of founders transform from sales-anxious to sales-confident by following this exact framework.

If you want to go deeper into Seth's frameworks, checklists and resources, don't miss the [Founder-Led Sales](#) community — it's a free resource for 250+ founders.



A guest post by

Seth DeHart

I run Founder Led Sales a resource library and community for Founders on the journey of finding PMF through hiring a sales leader. I've led sales for multiple scale ups and advised over 100 Founders. Currently a Venture Partner at Point Nine.

[Subscribe to Seth](#)

If you found today's newsletter valuable, share it with your team and please consider subscribing (it's free).

 **Subscribed**

Thanks for reading,

Kyle 🙏

 LIKE

 COMMENT

 RESTACK

© 2025 Kyle Poyar
548 Market Street PMB 72296, San Francisco, CA 94104
[Unsubscribe](#)

Get the app

 **Start writing**