

Phase changes at startups

Between 5 and 30 engineers, every startup goes through a handful of phase changes: the first hiring ramp, the founder stepping back from daily technical decisions, process that worked at 6 people failing at 14, a backlog that keeps growing despite what feels like prioritization, the first time two teams need to coordinate across domains, a prototype that works and now needs to become a production system, a pivot, the first management hire, the first external technical dependency.

The decisions made during these transitions set the trajectory for the engineering organization. Get the first hiring ramp right and the team compounds. Get it wrong and it takes a year to recover. The same applies to every other inflection point on that list.

A founder navigating these transitions is making decisions that benefit from outside reference points. Most of these situations share a property: the symptoms resemble ordinary growing pains. Delivery slows, but that could be technical debt. A senior hire underperforms, but that could be onboarding. Two teams drift apart, but that could be focus. An experienced engineering leader who has navigated similar transitions at other companies can distinguish the structural cause from the surface explanation early enough to act on it.

An engineering leader who has been through these inflection points can compress what would otherwise take 6-12 months of trial and error into weeks. The work is hands-on: diagnosing team dynamics, restructuring roles and processes, unblocking cross-team coordination, making the hard calls that people inside the reporting chain defer. It requires full engagement and clear ownership of the outcome, but only for the duration of the transition.

What this requires from the company is access. Understanding the org structure, the goals, the technical landscape. Sitting in the right meetings to see how decisions actually get made. Conversations with the founder, the EM, the tech leads, depending on where the transition is.

Every engagement looks different because every company's situation is different. There are no recipes. A practice that worked at one company may fail at another for reasons that only become visible in context. Research on best-practice transfer consistently finds that applying what worked elsewhere without understanding why it worked produces worse outcomes than careful diagnosis. The diagnosis determines the work, and the diagnosis changes as the work progresses. A longer research basis for these arguments is available in a companion document.

Startups hire engineering managers for steady state and fractional CTOs for ongoing strategic advice. Transition leadership sits between the two. Full engagement, bounded duration, accountable for a specific organizational outcome. Several of the startups in your portfolio are at one of these inflection points. The ones who get them right build faster for the next two years.