



Founder archetypes: Understanding modern day changemakers

A FOUNDER PLAYBOOK

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How we made the list

Trying to distill how modern founders think is not straightforward. The sheer diversity of founders, markets, and business models makes any attempt at a comprehensive view both complex and, to some extent, subjective.

Founders build across different geographies, sectors, and stages of scale — each shaped by unique constraints, opportunities, and moments in time. Some prioritise speed, others resilience; some operate with deep conviction, others through ambiguity. Even defining what makes a “great” founder is not straightforward — is it scale, influence, longevity, or the ability to endure uncertainty? Where do you even begin?

From there, we identified a curated group of companies that demonstrated a combination of scale, category influence, and the availability of long-form insights into how their founders think and make decisions. The cohort spans multiple geographies and sectors, including founders based in the United States, Europe, Singapore, and Australia.

Among those referenced are leaders across AI, SaaS, fintech, and platform businesses — including **Sam Altman (OpenAI)**, **Tom Brown (Anthropic)**, **Alex Bouaziz (Deel)**, **Dylan Field (Figma)**, **Melanie Perkins (Canva)**, **Patrick Collison and John Collison (Stripe)**, **Sebastian Siemiatkowski (Klarna)**, **Vlad Tenev (Robinhood)**, **Markus Villig (Bolt)**, and **Anthony Tan (Grab)**.

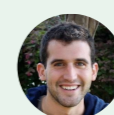
We then analysed long-form interviews, public talks, and investor materials from these founders using large language models, including ChatGPT and Gemini, to identify recurring mindsets, operating principles, and decision-making patterns. These insights were synthesised to surface consistent themes and distinct decision-making patterns — revealing the underlying logic shaping how today’s most ambitious founders think, decide, and build.

THE COHORT · 10 FOUNDERS



Sam Altman

OpenAI • United States



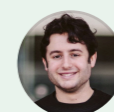
Tom Brown

Anthropic • United States



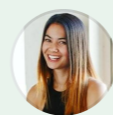
Alex Bouaziz

Deel • United States



Dylan Field

Figma • United States



Melanie Perkins

Canva • United States



Patrick & John Collison

Stripe • Ireland / US



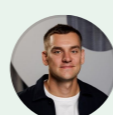
Sebastian Siemiatkowski

Klarna • Sweden



Vlad Tenev

Robinhood • United States



Markus Villig

Bolt • Estonia



Anthony Tan

Grab • Singapore

METHOD · 4 INPUTS

01	Long-form video interviews	PRIMARY
02	Public talks & keynotes	PRIMARY
03	Investor letters & materials	SECONDARY
04	LLM-assisted synthesis	SYNTHESIS

Executive summary

Building a company that endures is statistically rare. Globally, close to 20% of new businesses fail within their first year¹, and roughly half do not survive beyond five years. Only a small minority reach meaningful scale.

FIRST YEAR

~20%

of new businesses globally fail within their first year of operation.

FIRST 5 YEARS

~50%

do not survive beyond their fifth year. Only a small minority reach meaningful scale.

Source: <https://www.commerceinstitute.com/business-failure-rate/>

These odds have shaped founder behaviour over the past decade, particularly as the market shifted from capital abundance to capital scrutiny. Against this backdrop, founders are less defined by bravado, and more by innovation, ambition, agile thinking and operational rigor.

Across this cohort, a clear set of traits begins to emerge: a willingness to make unpopular decisions, comfort with ambiguity, a strong bias toward capital efficiency, and a preference for small, high-trust teams. These are not isolated tendencies, but recurring patterns in how modern founders operate under pressure.

Yet while the underlying mindset is often consistent, the path to scale is not. There is no single blueprint — only a set of distinct approaches shaped by context, ambition, and trade-offs.

From this, four founder archetypes emerge, each reflecting a different answer to the same question: **how do you scale without breaking what you've built?**



01

Pragmatic expanders

who optimise for durability over momentum



02

Speed-first operators

who seize early-mover advantage



03

Principled builders

who use rules to preserve speed at scale



04

Decisive leaders

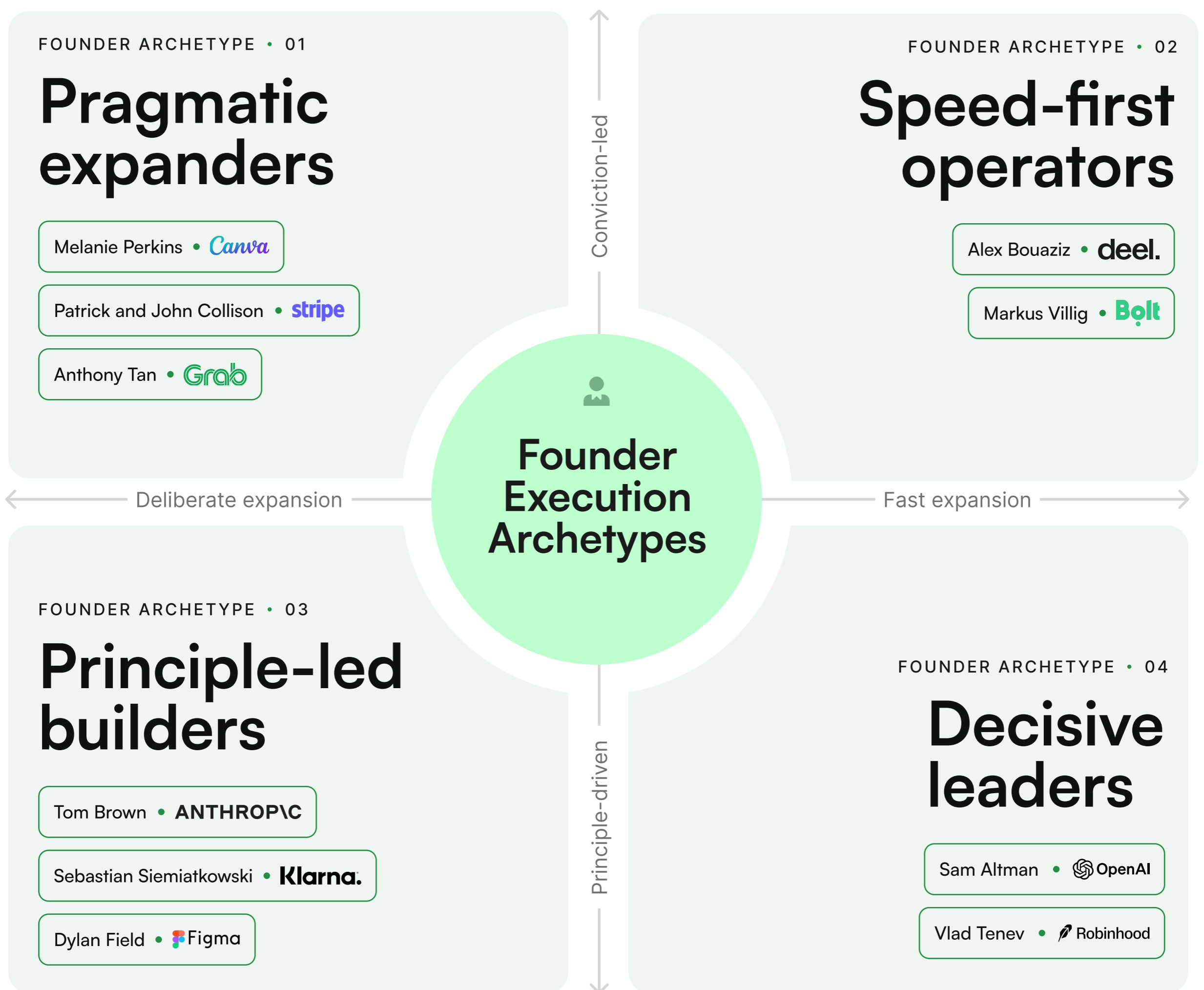
who centralise judgment while decentralising input

It is important to state that most founders exhibit more than one pattern, often overlapping multiple archetypes. Still in each case, a dominant execution logic shapes how they build, scale, and treat challenges.

This playbook explores these archetypes in depth, offering a lens into how today's most ambitious founders approach scale, trade-offs and set themselves up for long-term success.

4 paths to scale

The founders we examined have built companies that operate at extreme scale, serving tens to hundreds of millions of users, processing trillions in transaction volume, or underpinning critical infrastructure for global businesses. Despite this scale, their execution paths don't cluster around a single "growth playbook." Instead, four distinct operating patterns emerge — each representing a different answer to the same question: *how do you expand without breaking what you've built?*



Pragmatic expanders

They optimise for durability over momentum

These founders expand cautiously, entering new markets or product lines only when internal systems are ready. They believe premature expansion magnifies weaknesses and treat expansion as a test of organizational maturity. Therefore, they push growth only when the company can support it operationally and culturally.



Melanie Perkins

Canva

Demonstrates this through extreme patience in scaling Canva, delaying aggressive expansion until product simplicity, culture, and infrastructure were ready.



Patrick and John Collison

Stripe

Stripe makes long-term investments in internal tooling, documentation, and financial infrastructure — often years ahead of immediate revenue payoff.



Anthony Tan

Grab

Balances aggressive regional expansion with a deep understanding of local nuances, a strong sense of mission alignment, and a focus on long-term stakeholder trust.



Perkins describes this trade-off directly:

“One of the hardest things that we did was we actually didn't ship a product for 2 years. You should talk about enterprise not being fun, which I think is very fun, but not shipping products for a product company is very unfun. But what that really did was set the foundations of our technology platform that we've really been able to capitalize upon.”

Melanie Perkins • Canva

This same discipline shows up differently among founders. While Canva delayed product expansion until its foundations were ready, Grab applies a similar thoughtfulness in how it enters new markets.

Rather than prioritising speed alone, the company takes a deliberate, market-specific approach to growth. In Taiwan — its first full-scale market outside Southeast Asia — Grab entered through the acquisition of Foodpanda's delivery business, rather than building from scratch. Facing an unfamiliar market, it chose to anchor its expansion via an existing business with deep local understanding, allowing it to navigate cultural, operational, and consumer nuances from day one.

In both cases, expansion is treated as a test of readiness.

Speed-first operators

They seize early-mover advantage

These founders operate with a strong bias toward speed and market capture. They adopt this approach because delay is the greatest risk in their markets, so they accept operational ambiguity and calculated risk in exchange for early-mover strategic positioning.



Alex Bouaziz

Deel

Demonstrates this through Deel's rapid global expansion, often resolving constraints in parallel with growth.

deel.



Markus Villig

Bolt

Shows a similar pattern at Bolt, prioritizing fast geographic expansion and execution over early organizational polish.

Bolt



At Deel, Bouaziz describes this as “Deel speed”:

"One of our key company values is speed. Your customers need something. Your customers have an issue. Be there and solve that within the next 30 minutes, one hour, as fast as you can for them."

Alex Bouaziz • Deel

Villig's Bolt is known for launching lean and iterating ruthlessly. The company treats expansion as a portfolio of bets — entering new markets quickly with fixed time and budget constraints, and shutting down what doesn't work.

In Johannesburg, for example, Bolt launched without a physical presence — advertising remotely, hiring a local university student, and activating the service with minimal upfront investment. This ultra-lean approach allows the company to test multiple markets rapidly while limiting downside risk.

Principle-led builders

They use rules to preserve speed at scale

Leaders in this cohort rely heavily on principles to scale judgment across the organization. They have clear rules and values, preserving clarity as their organization scales.



Tom Brown
Anthropic

Demonstrates this most explicitly, emphasizing safety, boundaries, and governance as enablers of responsible AI progress.

ANTHROPIC



Dylan Field
Figma

Applies principles of craft and taste to preserve product coherence as Figma scales.

 **Figma**



Sebastian Siemiatkowski
Klarna

Uses cost discipline and focus as cultural principles, not temporary responses to market cycles.

Klarna.

Tom Brown demonstrates this most explicitly, emphasizing safety, boundaries, and governance as enablers of responsible AI progress. In fact, as Anthropic has scaled rapidly, the company has consistently prioritised structured approaches to understanding and mitigating AI risks, investing in areas such as model evaluation, safety research, and clear deployment standards alongside capability gains.



Brown explains this clearly when talking about Anthropic's approach:

“I feel like I’m cautiously optimistic in general. People aren’t angels and people aren’t devils. People are people. So I think people will use AI for all sorts of different stuff and it’s up to us to make sure that the benefits outweigh the costs.”

Tom Brown • Anthropic

Decisive leaders

They centralise judgment while decentralising input

This group believes decision-making ultimately lies with the founder. They gather input broadly — from teams, data, customers, and investors — but remain comfortable making decisions that are unpopular, harder to validate, or misunderstood at the time.

They've learned that consensus optimizes for comfort. For them, waiting for full alignment introduces fragility, especially in key moments. Therefore, clarity of judgment matters more than speed of agreement.



Sam Altman
OpenAI

Listens widely, but treats conviction as a prerequisite for progress.



Vlad Tenev
Robinhood

Shows strong centralized judgment in moments of regulatory and reputational pressure, choosing to defend controversial decisions rather than dilute responsibility.



Sam Altman consistently describes making long-horizon bets in AI despite unclear timelines, regulatory ambiguity, and public scrutiny. He listens widely, but treats conviction as a prerequisite for progress.



In his words:

“...having courage of your convictions, being a clear leader, saying we're going to do this, and that's why, even in the face of a lot of doubt, that seems to really correlate with success.”

Sam Altman • OpenAI

While this archetype emphasizes decisive leadership, founders rarely operate within a single model. In reality, they adjust their approach as scale introduces new trade-offs and constraints.

This segues into our next section.

Shared mindset of trailblazing founders

Across sectors and geographies, these founders operate very different businesses and contexts — yet, common threads consistently emerge, revealing a surprisingly similar set of instincts. Much of this can likely be attributed to navigating repeated inflection points and periods of volatility, shaping how today's founders build companies that endure.

01 Conviction drives decisions

Across the interviews, high-performing founders draw a clear line between listening and deciding. Input is essential; judgment isn't delegated. Many have lived through inflection points — product pivots, regulatory pressure, market reversals — where waiting for full agreement would have meant missed windows or diluted strategy. As a result, decision-making itself is treated as a core founder skill, not a process to delegate.

However, this isn't a rejection of feedback. Founders are explicit about their own fallibility, as Anthony Tan puts it:

“Know that you're not the smartest guy in the room. In fact, most people are smarter than you, so you just have to take feedback all the time.”



Anthony Tan
CEO



02

Building resilience and protecting risk

Momentum without resilience is viewed as fragile — and, in hindsight, risky. Founders such as Melanie Perkins, the Collison Brothers, and Anthony Tan consistently talk about strengthening their business against hidden risks. They focus less on growth rates and more on longevity: systems that scale, culture that prevails, unit economics that work, and operations that don't buckle under pressure.

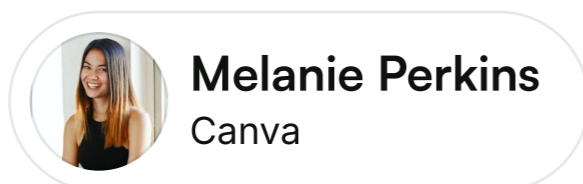
This belief is shaped by experience. Many have lived through macroeconomic challenges and abrupt market shifts, including capital tightening and regulatory shifts. Those moments likely shifted their definition of progress — and while speed still matters, staying power matters more.



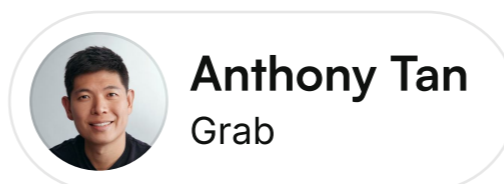
In practice, this shows up as:

- Conservative hiring and delayed scaling
- Upfront investment in infrastructure and tooling
- Expansion paced by operational readiness, not market hype

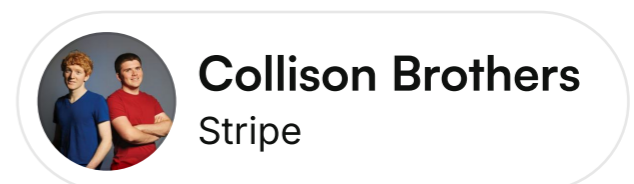
Founders associated with this mindset



Melanie Perkins
Canva



Anthony Tan
Grab



Collison Brothers
Stripe

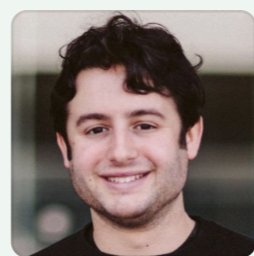
03

Complexity is a liability

Founders also showed a strong bias against unnecessary complexity. Organizational sprawl, heavy process, and layered decision-making are treated as risks to be contained, not signs of maturity.

For example, Dylan Field, Tom Brown, and Markus Villig prioritize clear ownership and tight feedback loops. Even as their companies scale, they deliberately delay adding layers and processes, stepping in personally when complexity slows progress. Field captures this instinct clearly:

“When my team comes to me and says, ‘Hey, we’ve got like a nine-month roadmap on this feature’, I’m like ‘What can we do to de-scope or figure out how to get this out faster to start talking to people?’”



Dylan Field
CEO



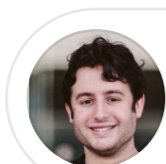
As organizations grow, they view unclear ownership and slow feedback as existential risks — especially in fast-moving or regulated markets.



What this means:

- Small, high-trust teams with end-to-end ownership
- A bias toward execution speed over organizational polish

Founders associated with this mindset



Dylan Field
Figma



Tom Brown
Anthropic



Markus Villig
Bolt

04

Embracing uncertainty

Today's modern founders expect uncertainty. They adopt this mindset because — according to them — static plans fail under real pressure.

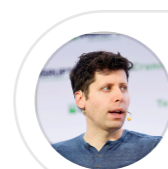
Sam Altman, Alex Bouaziz, and Anthony Tan are among those who consistently talk about building companies designed to adapt. Instead of anchoring on precise forecasts, they optimize for flexibility: modular systems, reversible decisions, and teams trusted to adjust quickly as conditions change.



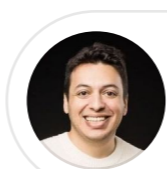
This belief appears in:

- Long-term ambition paired with short-term adaptability
- Willingness to operate ahead of certainty and adjust later
- Market-by-market adaptation rather than uniform global playbooks

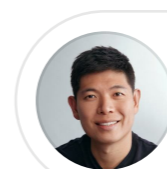
Founders associated with this mindset



Sam Altman
OpenAI



Alex Bouaziz
Deel

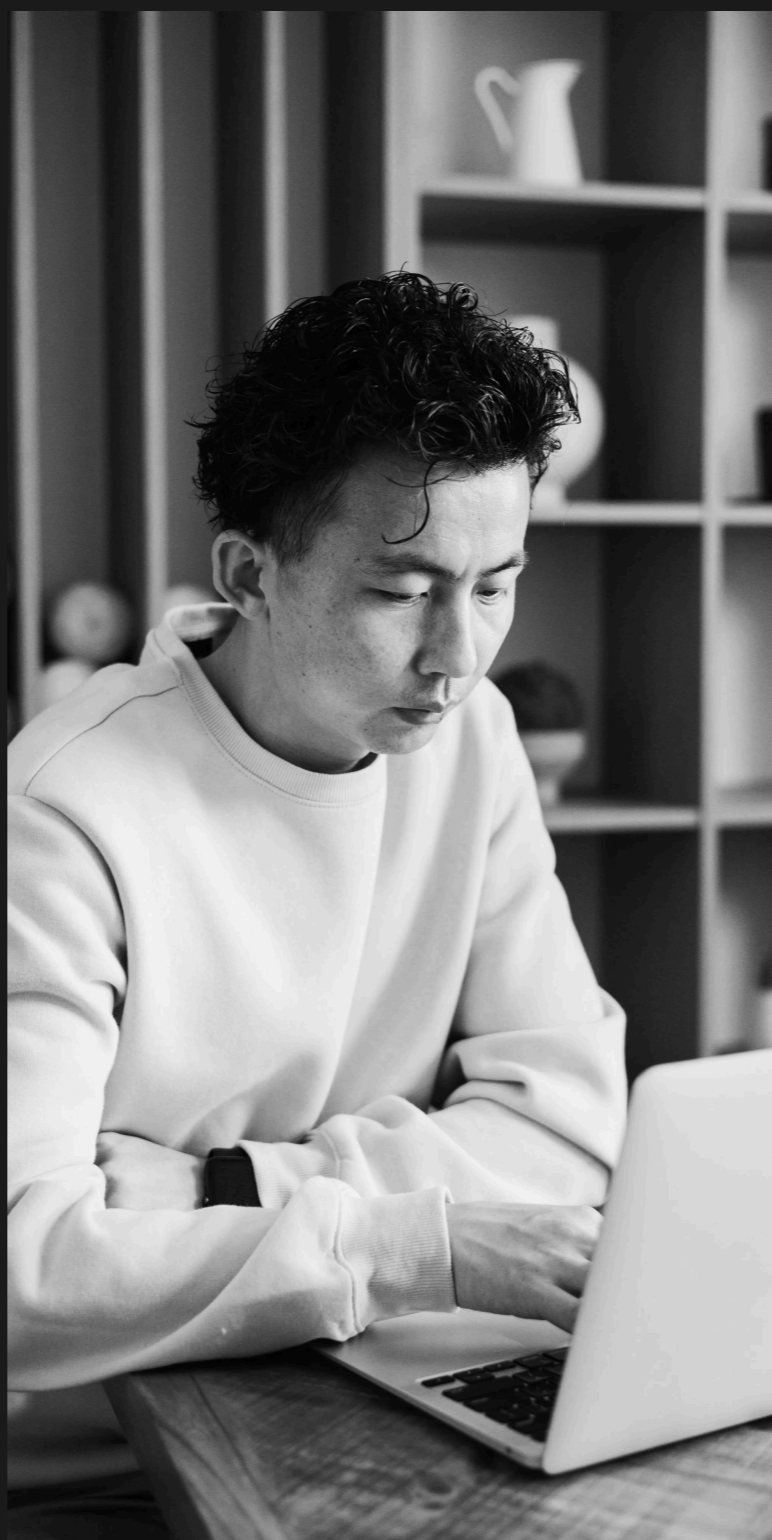


Anthony Tan
Grab

So where do you fit?

You've just explored the founder archetypes shaping today's startup landscape.

The next step is understanding which one best reflects your own approach to building.



Click the link below to discover your founder archetype and what it reveals about how you make decisions, manage risk and pursue growth.

[Take the Founder Archetypes quiz →](#)

A founder's reflection



Andrea Baronchelli

Andrea is the co-founder and CEO of Aspire. Prior to Aspire, he was part of Lazada's founding team and spent 6 years building the region's leading e-commerce platform. Andrea is a Y-Combinator alum.

Early in my career as a young banker, I vividly recall feeling restless. The rules were already written and there was little room to question them, let alone reshape them.

What drew me instead was questioning established models and creating new ones. That's where founders do their real work. It's also the moment we're living through now, shaped by rapid technological shifts, changing capital dynamics, and a reset of how companies are built and scaled. Only a small group of people are truly figuring out how to navigate these periods — how to chart a course when there's no map.

The most meaningful things in the world tend to start before the rules exist. That sense of possibility was what pushed me to step into uncertainty and build something from scratch.

This Founder Archetypes playbook resonated deeply with me. In the early days of building Aspire, nothing was obvious. The first few years were filled with doubt, constant questioning, and decisions made without the comfort of precedent. You keep going because you believe something important is being built.

What I've learned — and what comes through clearly in this playbook — is that enduring founders tend to create their own rules. They're not satisfied operating within systems they can't influence. They hold unusually high standards, surround themselves with exceptional people, and stay restless when bureaucracy and red tape creep in.

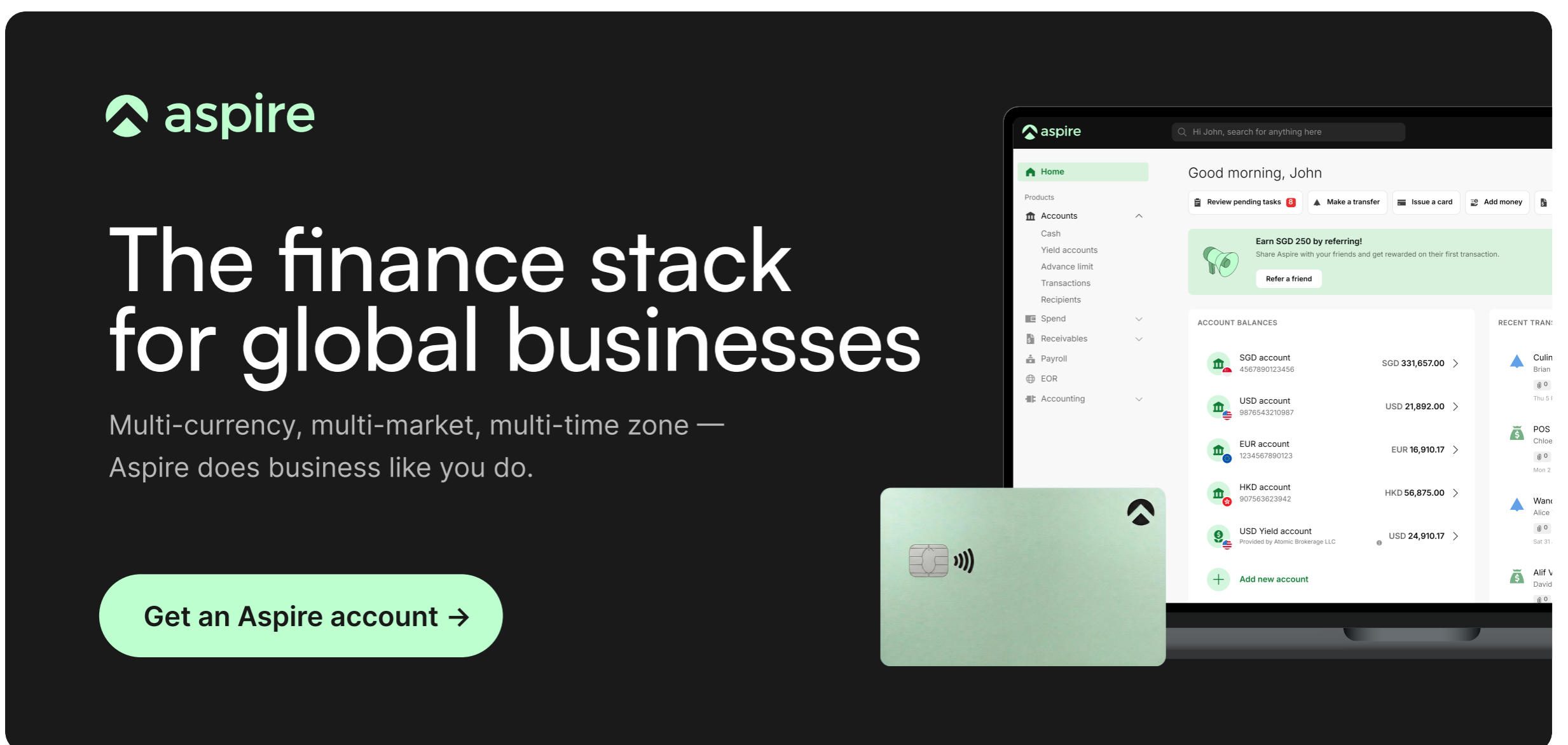
But this mindset isn't ideological — it's deeply practical. It shows up in how deliberately you expand, how patient you are when foundations aren't ready, and how willing you are to move in parallel rather than waiting for perfect conditions.

Vision, in this context, isn't about grand statements. It's about consistently choosing excellence when easier paths exist. To me, that is what defines today's most successful founders.

Sources

The list below is indicative and not exhaustive of the sources referenced.

- 01 [Y Combinator — Sam Altman](#)
- 02 [Y Combinator — Tom Brown](#)
- 03 [Y Combinator — Founder talk](#)
- 04 [Million Stories Media](#)
- 05 [Bloomberg Wealth — Robinhood](#)
- 06 [20VC with Harry Stebbings — 01](#)
- 07 [20VC with Harry Stebbings — 02](#)
- 08 [The Diary of a CEO](#)
- 09 [Rapid Response](#)
- 10 [Goldman Sachs — Canva founder](#)



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The advertisement features a dark background with the Aspire logo in green. The main headline is in large white font. Below it, a smaller white font describes the service as multi-currency, multi-market, and multi-time zone. A prominent green button with white text and a right-pointing arrow is positioned at the bottom left. On the right side, a screenshot of the Aspire mobile app is displayed, showing a dashboard with account balances for SGD, USD, EUR, and HKD, along with a 'Refer a friend' promotion. A green Aspire card is shown in the foreground, partially overlapping the app screenshot.