

Every founder-led brand hits the point where vision is no longer enough to run it.

The brands that keep growing add operating leadership before the business breaks, not after.

Olipop just made the move while winning.

Valued at \$1.85 billion, with a \$1 billion sales goal, Olopop named its first non-founder CEO. The founder moved to research, strategy and board chair.

"On the operational side, the not-so-fun part of the business, that's where I come in."

Christian Patiño Webb, Olipop CEO, Food Dive, October 2026

50%

of founders were no longer CEO by the time their startups were three years old, per Harvard's Noam Wasserman. Most of those changes were not the founder's choice.

1 per week

New better-for-you soda competitors entering the market, while PepsiCo and Coca-Cola move in. When the giants arrive, execution decides who wins.

SEVEN SIGNS

You have outgrown founder-only leadership.

If three or more apply, it's time to plan the handoff.

Every decision routes through the founder

Pricing, hiring, trade spend and retailer escalations all wait for one person. The team has learned to wait instead of act.

Growth is outrunning your systems

Spreadsheet forecasts, rising out-of-stocks, piling deductions and a month-end close that takes weeks.

Margin is slipping while sales rise

Trade, freight and co-man costs grow faster than revenue, and nobody owns contribution margin by SKU and customer.

The founder lives in operations

More time on supply chain fires than on product, brand, investors and key retailers.

Retail partners are feeling it

Late shipments, missed promotions and low fill rates.
Retailers rarely complain twice. They reassign the shelf.

Investors are asking about the team

When the board asks who runs operations, they are telling you how they see the risk.

The founder is tired of the scale work

If the founder dreads the operating cadence, it won't get done well. That's not a flaw. It's information.

Split the roles in writing.

The founder keeps vision, product, culture and key relationships.

The operator owns the P&L, supply chain, sales execution, cash and the team.

FOUR WAYS TO MAKE THE HANDOFF

From lightest to heaviest.

Fractional COO

Part-time senior operator who installs systems, cadence and team without a full-time salary and equity grant.

Fractional President or CEO

Runs the business for a defined period, steadies the operation and helps recruit the long-term leader.

Full-time COO or President

Once the role is defined and the business can carry it. Hire into a working operating system.

New CEO, founder in a new role

The Olipop model. Works best when the founder chooses it and the new role is real.

What the first 90 days should deliver.

Days 1 to 30: learn and stabilize.

Days 31 to 60: install the operating cadence.

Days 61 to 90: commit to a 12-month plan and report against it.

The handoff is a sign of strength.

The best time to add an operator is before you need one badly.

Full piece: marc-drucker.com