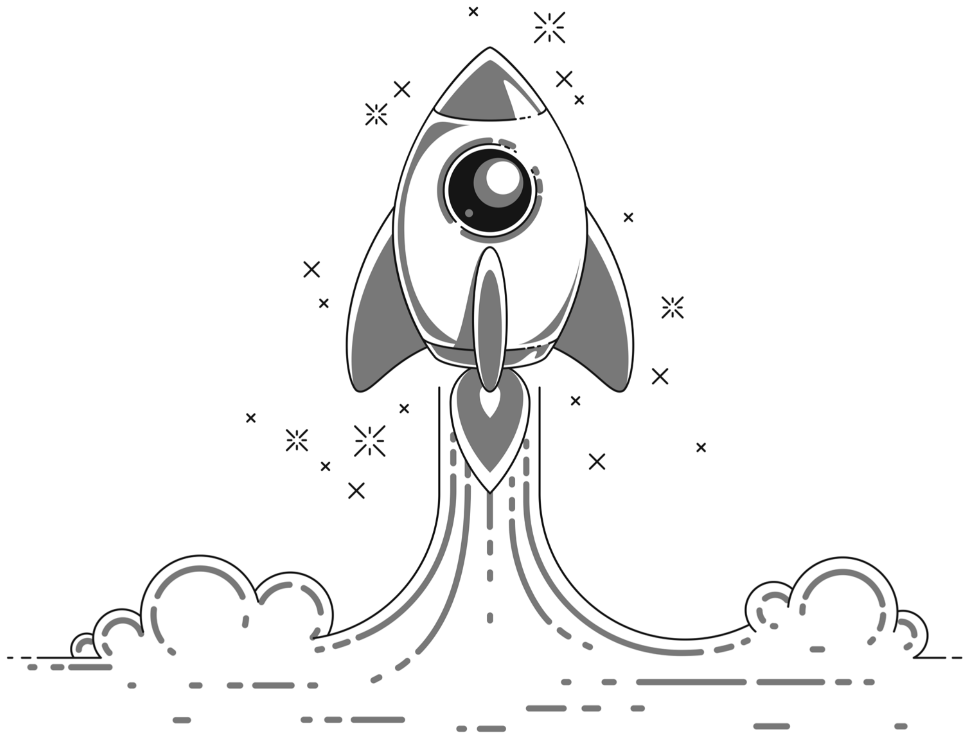

SKILLUP AS YOU SCALEUP

THE SEVEN DIMENSIONS OF A SUCCESSFUL STARTUP LEADERSHIP CAREER

FIRST EDITION

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Dedication

To my mother, my wife, and my late grandmother for always believing in me and being patient with me. To my brother, Fadel, for taking on more than his share of responsibility, freeing me up to write this book. To my kids for being an inspiration to me with their patience and positive outlook on life.

To my late dad for always challenging me to be a better person and stick to high values.

Resources

You can access the additional tools and resources mentioned throughout this book through **www.skillupasyouscaleup.com**, where I'll be diving deeper into each of the SAUS principles shared in this book. Some of the key resources you can access include:

- **SAUS infographics**
- **Training videos**
- **Links to recommended articles and books**
- **Links to all my webinars and interviews**
- **An application form to volunteer for my research projects and case studies. I'll be making the announcements through my monthly newsletters**

Access the tools and resources by following this link
www.skillupasyouscaleup.com

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Preface

Once you join as a leader, how do you know if joining a startup is the right career move for you?

If you don't find the right startup to join, is it better to wait or join one anyway?

Skill Up as You Scale Up, or as I refer to it, SAUS, is about learning as you help build a company so you can eventually reach your goals. It's a guiding philosophy that will give you the right mindset to minimize the probability of failure through incremental improvements and quick course corrections. The seven dimensions of SAUS and their principles are simple guidelines to help you be mindful of what really matters in your startup leadership role. They will help you succeed in building a scalable operation, whether you're looking after onboarding, customer care, sales, marketing, or finance.

Mastering how to manage systems is crucial for any leader working in a startup or large corporation, especially one that's outside major hubs like Silicon Valley or London. An effective and high-impact leader is responsible for designing and building a scalable function. You may have experience in the corporate world, but if you don't know how to build your operation incrementally and work with limited resources, you'll likely fail at your mission.

The reason I wrote this book is to help subject matter experts increase their chances of successfully joining growing startups as top leaders and assess whether such an environment is right for them. I connect with this because I failed many projects as a startup leader, a founder, and an investor before I got the hang of the formula and started succeeding. So I understand the pain that many go through when leaving stable jobs for the thrill (and financial rewards once things go well) of building a company. As domain experts, you could come from the corporate world, or failed startups, or maybe you were even the founder of a startup. Whatever your background, the aim of this book is to equip you with enough information to know if joining a startup is the right path for you, and if so, what is the right one to join and what is the optimal route to success. It's my mission to help others succeed in their roles as startup leaders. As we downsize in a post-COVID-19 recession at the time of writing, more startups will be formed, and they'll be responsible for creating new jobs feeding families around the world.

I saw colleagues and friends who are industry experts join startups and fail at delivering sustainable value, eventually getting terminated after a few failed projects. I had to fire some colleagues myself, which wasn't a good feeling—but I had to do what I had to do. I also saw many startup founders hire experts who lacked the team spirit and grit to succeed in a startup role. by grit, I mean having the stamina and passion to work collectively as a team, succeeding in the face of unique challenges, keeping an eye on the big picture, and not meddling in office politics.

During my journey, I had to take calculated risks which were borderline gambling, invest in startups, start my own company, and join growing startups. I had to learn through mistakes that were avoidable if I had had a book like this. Instead of thinking like a financial or business analyst, I needed to get into the weeds of the operations and understand the journey of companies like Toyota, IBM, and Apple, which grew from small enterprises to giants which have stayed at the top for decades. I believe that achieving long-term operational excellence is a science that has been reserved for large, profitable, and well-funded—mostly manufacturing—companies. It's an area that has been neglected by most tech startups when it comes to scaling up. That's why most corporate experts fail to deliver tangible value when they join startups—because they come from an established, mature environment, and haven't gone through the pain of building an operation from scratch on limited resources trying to find an optimal tailored solution. Replicating how they worked in their previous job simply doesn't cut it. Some also fail because they don't know how to get into the weeds and learn with a fresh mindset. I'll be covering all these principles later in the seven dimensions of SAUS.

Let's assume that the startup leadership path is right for you. The next challenge is to determine whether you're looking at the right startup for you, and that it has the potential to become a profitable and successful company.

It's fascinating how companies like Google, Apple, and Spotify were able to establish scalable operational excellence as they grew that has been holding together for years. What made them different from the other startups they were competing against when they began? Google came later than Yahoo, MSN, AltaVista, Ask Jeeves, Excite, HotBot, and Lycos, but quickly surpassed them in popularity and value creation. Today, the only real competitor Google has is Microsoft's Bing due to the most recent update of ChatGPT. They all started from the seed of an idea and grew to become who they are.

Each industry is different and shaped by socio-economic, political, and technological variables. For example, companies like Microsoft and Apple had to deal with challenges such as a lack of investors who believed in them and the incumbents like IBM and Xerox who could've crushed them if they had the right people on board at the time. Airbnb had no competitors to worry about but was struggling to raise funds as it was continually rejected due to the challenges caused by its business model. Airbnb had to find a way to make it safe for hosts to rent their spare rooms to strangers and make it attractive and safe for guests to look for unique, cost-effective experiences. The ecosystem challenges keep evolving with time, and the variables also change. So it's important to be able to analyze these changes to help you assess which is the right startup for you to join that will benefit your career—and your pocket!

As time passed, Silicon Valley created a critical mass of deals that started attracting more investors, entrepreneurs, and talents until it became the global hub for tech innovation, which also had a spill-over effect on the rest of the US. However, Canve.com (from Australia) and Spotify (from Sweden) had investments from venture capitalists (VCs) in Silicon Valley that contributed to them becoming unicorns.[1] This means that you don't need to be based in Silicon Valley to become a unicorn. Studying the factors that made them global brands is fascinating, and it could also help you understand which startup is right for you to join and which to avoid.

When building and scaling a company, we start with the spirit of meritocracy and open opportunity for people to rise quickly through the ranks. However, as the company grows, it becomes more challenging to keep employees away from office politics and prevent the dysfunctional behaviors that foster a lack of trust and ruin company culture over time. Protecting the agile startup culture requires understanding how scalable operational systems are built. By operational systems, I mean a combination of organizational structure, routines, and technology. Therefore, managing systems is critical to your success as a startup leader, and it will give you the mindset to thrive in the dynamics of a growing startup environment.

Robert E. Siegel, who lectures on management at Stanford and is the author of *The Brains and Brawn Company*, explains that a successful systems leader is a person who can build a customized approach between the operation of a

1 Unicorns refer to startups that have exceeded the valuation of $1 billion through confirmed investments by venture capital investors or through being listed on the stock market.

digital and traditional system, which he compares to the anatomy of the human body. Building customized solutions that emulate the anatomy of a healthy human body requires critical and analytical thinking so you can effectively handle the challenges and opportunities of the startup, growth, and mature phases of building a company. As the company gets larger, you need to ask yourself whether you should build your capabilities internally from scratch, acquire a smaller company to build such a capability, or partner with a larger player and build on their strength. There's no one right answer to this question.

Who Is This Book For?

This book is for anyone who has an opportunity to join or has joined a growing startup (or scale up) as a senior leader, part of the top management team, or as a function owner. This book is for you if you're:

1. A corporate misfit who's fed up with the office politics which plague large companies.
2. A subject matter expert, and an entrepreneur at heart, who wants to accelerate their career.
3. A former startup founder who doesn't want to start a new startup from scratch and wants to join an existing growing startup instead.
4. A fresh university graduate who's joining a startup.

This book has a pragmatic approach toward building a successful career as a startup leader in a world that's recovering from the economic downturn triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. I also took into account the challenges faced by developing startup hubs[2] such as Dubai (United Arab Emirates), Chennai (India), Cairo (Egypt), and Lagos (Nigeria). This book is designed to be very easy and quick to read, giving you a quick snapshot of what you need to be aware of, what you need to learn and where you can find out more about it, and how to think as a startup leader. All of this will help you increase your chances of success by avoiding the simple mistakes that most new startup leaders make.

Even though most of the principles in this book can be applied in any startup ecosystem, some of the advice offered is more conservative to address the constraints in developing, rather than mature, startup ecosystems. There

2 Developing startup hubs have the foundations to support startup ecosystems, such as availability of funding, startup-friendly regulations, and a steady flow of new startups forming and growing.

are already books on how to successfully navigate the startup leadership career path, such as *Startup CXO* by Matt Blumberg, which is very comprehensive and highly recommended. Reading this book will help you to absorb the information and advice in *Startup CXO*, which goes into greater detail of each function within organizations. Other books, like *Masters of Scale* by Reid Hoffman, focus on developed startup ecosystems like Silicon Valley (USA), London (UK), and Beijing (China). However, some of the advice in these books only works in developed ecosystems and could backfire if applied in emerging ecosystems. The simplest example is *Blitzscaling*, also by Hoffman (and Chris Yeh), which refers to an approach to market expansion that prioritizes speed over efficiency. For this approach to work, prerequisite conditions need to be present, which are mostly available in mature startup ecosystems. These conditions include having access to a large amount of capital and qualified investors who understand the risks and can advise how to overcome the barriers faced. It's well worth a read.

As opposed to the developed hubs I mentioned earlier, emerging startup hubs go through socio-economic changes as they evolve, with many similarities among them, making it more challenging for you to navigate through them and improve your chances of success.

How Can You Use This Book?

This book is meant to be a go-to reference as you build your operation. When you want to reflect on something you did or look for inspiration to find a solution to a challenge you're facing, skim through the principles within the applicable dimension until you find one that's relevant and it will help you move forward. Throughout the book, I'll recommend resources to help you learn more about specific subjects.

What's the SAUS Philosophy?

The SAUS philosophy is based on the belief that the quickest and most efficient way to deliver impactful results is to learn on the go instead of taking a time-out to learn a discipline or wait until you have the right resources. If you lack time, money, and skills to implement improvements, then learning through a project-oriented problem-solving approach is the ideal way to succeed in your startup leadership role. This is true specifically during the startup stage and as you scale up the operation.

As you grow into a corporation, this will change somewhere along the way. You'll be able to afford to hire specialists who will take full responsibility for implementing scalable improvements within their area of expertise. If you're in a startup, implementing full ERP (enterprise resource planning) software will be unfeasible. So, you'll end up implementing a mix of routines, spreadsheets, and Kanban boards to get the job done successfully.

This kind of pragmatic thinking requires strategic critical thinking skills that enable you to reverse engineer where you want to go in a lean manner, prioritize the projects accurately, and form your critical success path. Once you gain better clarity, you'll be more confident in your startup leadership. As you do this more often, you'll get comfortable with the approach and become faster at delivering successful implementations and positive results.

The best business schools implement a similar approach in teaching their graduate students through business case studies. In an attempt to simulate the conditions of a business case, the professors share real case studies of business problems that occurred in the past and coach their graduate students through coming up with effective solutions, then comparing them to what the companies actually did. Many of these business schools partner up with global names like General Electric, Boeing, and Microsoft to work on real projects through internships and case studies.

The challenge with implementing SAUS is that it will push you out of your conventional way of thinking and decision-making, which is usually data-driven and involves following steps and checklists with some time to breathe. However, in a growing startup environment, you have to make decisions quickly and move fast, and often, you don't have enough data to make a decision. So, the best approach is to accept the fact that you'll make mistakes. Just try to make them very small and fixable. You need to take a strategic approach to decision-making, which means factoring in data, probability, and gut feeling. Another challenge is to know when to take on the decision and responsibility alone and when to involve others.

The SAUS principles will help raise your awareness on how to overcome these challenges and become more effective at your role.

THE SAUS PHILOSOPHY WILL BENEFIT YOU BY:

1. Reducing your stress when making tough decisions.
2. Helping you effectively deliver quicker results.
3. Improving your capacity to deal with surprise situations.
4. Paving the path toward scalability through incremental improvements that stand the test of time.
5. Changing your mindset so it becomes result-driven rather than about your ego being bruised when making mistakes.

The Seven Dimensions of the SAUS Philosophy

The SAUS philosophy promotes using critical and analytical thinking to improve the accuracy of your decisions step by step and reach operational excellence as you scale up your growing startup. These incremental enhancements are achieved through implementing minimum viable optimizations (MVOs)[3] to meet the business' short- to medium-term goals without consuming too many resources. I'll be elaborating more about what MVOs are in Dimension Four: Process Improvement and Optimization.

Many of us who join growing startups after many years of working in well-established corporate environments are used to working in medium to large cross-functional project teams, often up to fifty employees or more, on enhancement projects that often have long timelines. These are sometimes broken up into smaller teams, including cross-functional employees from different departments, external consultants, and employees from a corporate partner or equipment/software vendors. All decisions have to be cascaded down, and feedback has to be communicated upward to management and across the teams. It's only natural to fall back on our experience and adopt the same approach when joining a startup. However, this will most likely lead us to fail due to a lack of resources and overplanning. The belief that we'll succeed in delivering the same result if we follow the same approach is a key bias.

From my personal experience, I was involved in an eighteen-month project implementing an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system for a medium-sized multinational enterprise that involved more than fifty cross-functional

3 MVO refers to the minimum number of changes in processes or policies that are required to achieve a successful improvement in throughput, quality, or time.

team members. The budget was more than $500,000. It ended up failing due to a lack of collaboration and accountability and, later, funding. So I learned a lot from it, which enabled me to avoid the same mistakes that were made in that project. Many years later, I had to lead the implementation of a customer support ticketing system within a startup environment with a project team of five people and a budget of only $1,000. I had to look at it with a fresh mindset, following what I call the MVO approach, which helped me focus on the critical path to success and leave every other requirement for later. Yes, it worked. Within one year, we went from having daily complaints to being one of the top-rated payment companies in the MENA region.

When solving problems at a startup, you don't have the time, money, or staff to pause things, learn, or hire consultants to solve the problem for you. You have to learn by adopting a problem-solving mindset where you outline the goal, how you can achieve the goal, and what the deliverables are.

You must be intentional as you build the components of your company with the bigger picture in mind. Like laying the foundations of a house, you need to develop the blueprint design, then gradually build each room and floor as needed while giving yourself the flexibility to adjust your blueprint as you pivot and discover new constraints.

Aiming at perfection or avoiding failure is unrealistic and counterproductive because it leads to overplanning, overanalyzing, and expensive delays, which could result in losing your job and possibly bankrupting the startup. The SAUS principles are built to help you become a better and more confident decision-maker and learn what you need to succeed.

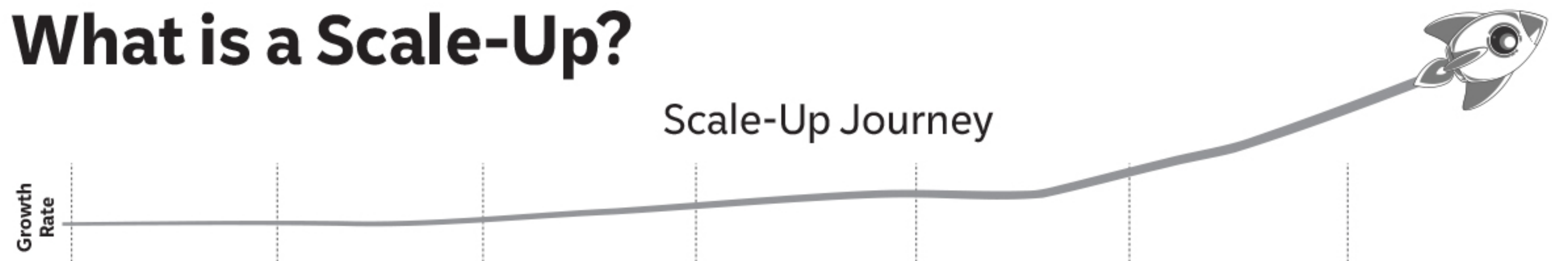
What Is a Scale-up?

A scale-up is a growing startup that has achieved significant success in the startup phase and is ready for the next level. They have created a name for themselves in a city or a country with one or two products and are experiencing rapid growth and expansion. With a proven business model, a steady revenue stream, and a growing customer base, tech startups must expand their market share beyond their state or country. So if the startup was formed in Delhi and they achieved success in Delhi, they need to start expanding into the rest of India and beyond, which requires cash injection from investors instead of focusing on profitability. Scale-ups require capital injection for every country they expand into or for any product they launch, although they differ in profitability when they achieve a level of maturity. So, they mostly continue to face funding limitations and operational efficiency challenges as they strive to sustain their growth trajectory. The company's growth stage is one of the key factors that will impact your decision on whether to join, stay, or leave.

The term startup has been used for decades, but the term scale-up has recently surfaced to describe growing startups that are focused on expanding market shares to dominate regions or continents. It has become a popular term in publications in recent years, although most investors don't typically use it to represent a stage of maturity. Instead, they look at the evolution of a startup by funding stages such as pre-seed, seed, startup, series A, series B, and series C. Most investors aim for a rewarding exit that will enable them to sell their shares for a return in multiples of the amount they invested at the beginning, as opposed to low-risk investments, which typically return up to 7% annually in the best economic conditions.

What is a Scale-Up?

Scale-Up Journey



	Preseed	Seed	Series A	Series B	Series C	Series D+	Public Offering
Fund Raised	$50,000 to $500,000 (Sometimes up to $1 Million)	$100,000 to $6 Million	$5 to $20 Million	$10 to $50 Million	$30 to $500 Million	$100+	$100+
Average Period from Start	3 to 9 Months	12 to 18 Months Million	12 to 36 Months	24 Months	51 Months (27 Months B to C)	+60 Months	+60 Months
Valuation (Pre-Money)		$3 to $6 Million	Up to $24 Million	$40 to $60 Million	$100 to $200 Million		
Number of Staff	Founders (Sometimes a couple of employees)	2 to 10 People (Sometimes only the founders)	10 to 110 Employees	90 to 280 Employees	200 to 1000	Going from 100's to 1000's	Going from 100's to 1000's
Locations	One	One	Small Region	Large Region	Global	Global	Global
Typical Investors	Founders (Friends & Family) and Small Investors	Accelerators and some VC's	VC and some Angel Investors	VC	VC	VC	VC (+ Public Shareholders in the case of IPO)
Purpose	Ensure the idea is viable and is worth investing resources into a pitch and a prototype.	Product-Market-Fit through developing a Minimum-Viable-Product and many iterations.	Build a revenue-generating and working product. Crrate a scalable blueprint.	Identified Product-Market-Fit. Capture as many customers as possible while establishing operational efficiency and scalability. Path to profitability.	Build a new product and expand into new markets.	They have lowered the risk of the startup, and they have proved that they're scaling and need to accelerate the scaling globaly.	Alternatively, they want to reward their investors with an exit and to scale globally.

Disclaimer: These numbers are still work-in-progress and are only used to educate the audience on the thinking process and the abstract logic behind the rounds that lead to scaling up a company.

Figure 1: The scale-up journey

"Startups are a catalyst for economic growth both globally and locally. The value that startups create is nearly on par with the GDP of a G7 economy and the amount of startup funding in 2021 surpassed $600 billion, shattering funding records. The number of unicorns is well past the 1,000 mark and growing exponentially."[4]

Jeremy Jurgens,
Managing Director,
World Economic Forum

4 Jeremy Jurgens, "How Startups Drive Economic Recovery While Growing Responsibly," *World Economic Forum*, May 12, 2022, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/05/how-startups-help-drive-economic-recovery-and-growth.

Many experts and economists consider startups to be critical drivers of economic growth and innovation, as they create jobs, enhance the quality of services offered to citizens, and contribute to the overall vitality of the business ecosystem.

The Importance of Scalability

Regardless of your industry, marketplace, or mission, the stages a company goes through to become an established corporation are all the same. A corporation or enterprise is a profit-making company that is either listed on a public stock exchange or a privately owned shareholding company.

Before a company becomes a listed corporation, it must earn its stripes to be defined as a corporation. It must have expanded in its target region with an evolving mix of products and a clear, competitive position in the market. It needs to have high margins and steady growth toward profitability, if not already profitable.

By the end of the scale-up phase, your company's stock should be so attractive that, once the company goes public through an initial public offering (IPO), investors will flock to buy your shares, and the set price of the share will keep rising. That is the ideal scenario.

To get there, a company has to build a scalable operation that has business continuity, efficiency, and excellence embedded within its DNA. The following four components are some of the building blocks of a scalable operation:

1. TRANSPARENT PROCESSES

Transparent processes that every employee in every department quickly understands. That means if someone gets hit by a bus or wins the lottery and leaves, someone else can continue following the same process with minimal service delivery disruption.

2. CLEAR ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Clear organizational structure with each function's role within each service's value creation flow outlined. This includes establishing strategic tools and methods such as key performance indicators (KPIs); objectives and key results (OKRs); and responsible, accountable, consulted, and informed (RACI) matrices for projects.

The **OKRs** of the company and all its functions should align with those of the CEO. For example, if one of the deliverables is to be rated as 4.5 out of 5 on Google Reviews or Trust Pilot, then who is accountable for this, and how will it be cascaded? It would probably look something like the figure below.

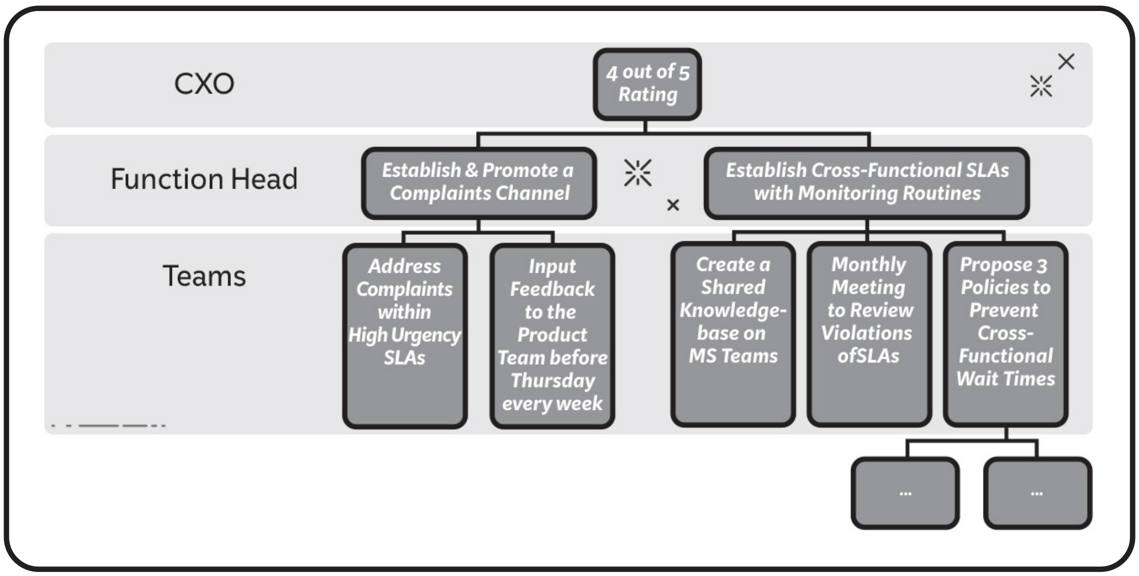


Figure 2: Owners of company functions

KPIs are metrics that will help you assess your current position and where you're heading in the future. Some examples include:

- **Customer Acquisition Cost**: This represents the cost to acquire and obtain one active customer or a customer that makes a purchase. The definition of an active customer might vary based on your business model. If you're model is a software subscription—Software-as-a-Service (SaaS)—business model, then the qualifying criterion would be any customer who paid for at least one month's subscription. If it's a campaign you're running for your existing customers to upgrade, then the criteria will be narrower. This could be through upselling to a premium version or cross-selling related products to enhance their experience.

$$Customer\,Acquisition\,Cost\,(CAC) = \frac{Sales\,and\,Marketing\,Expenses}{Number\,of\,New\,Customers}$$

This KPI aims to measure your campaigns' performance, compare with previous ones, and benchmark against industry standards. This will also help you justify customer retention incentives when compared against the customer churn and customer lifetime value (LTV).

- **Customer Conversion Rate**: This is a percentage of potential customers you convert into paying customers. Depending on the business model, the definition of converted customer might change.

For example, if you're an online retail store, then you could define a customer as someone who has made a purchase, and put a heavier emphasis on revenue per visitor (RPV) and average order value (AOV).

$$Conversion\,Rate\,(\%) = \frac{Number\,of\,Purchases}{Number\,of\,Visitors}\,x\,100$$

If you have a SaaS[5] business model and are subscription-based, then the formula will be as follows:

$$Conversion\,Rate\,(\%) = \frac{Number\,of\,New\,Customers}{Number\,of\,Leads}\,x\,100$$

In the SaaS model, you'll need to narrow the focus on the types of customer that add the highest value to your business so you can double-down on servicing them, whether they're large-volume low-margin customers or low-volume high-margin customers. Measuring the monthly recurring revenue (MRR), customer acquisition cost (CAC), and customer lifetime value (LTV) will help you better understand who you need to focus on and how long it takes to convert existing customers into paying ones, referred to as the sales cycle length. The usual hypothesis is, the shorter the conversion and onboarding cycle, the higher the conversion rate, and the lower the cost. However, achieving that usually entails overcoming many internal and external challenges.

- **Operating Profit**: This is an excellent KPI to measure the health of the business and how far your startup is from profitability.

$$Operating\,Profit = Gross\,Profit - Operating\,Expenses - Depreciation - Amortization$$

It usually takes a startup three to four years to turn an operating profit. If it's a tech startup, then it might take even longer as the need to gain regional or global market share trumps the need to achieve immediate profitability. If developing the technology is too expensive to serve just one country or a small population, then gaining a larger market share is crucial. Also, introducing

5 Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) is a model offered by many software providers, such as Microsoft, Adobe, and Google, where a customer pays a monthly or annual subscription to use the software.

sending educational newsletters, do you send them once a week on the weekend in the morning or send them out once a month on the first day of the week? There's no one right answer that fits all scenarios.

When you hire a marketing expert, they'll guide you through the norms of the region you're operating in and the habits of the target profiles and personas you're communicating with. To avoid falling into the trap of stereotyping and feeding your biases on what works and doesn't work, make sure you seek insights from marketing experts, previous campaign reports, and audience sample interviews, and that you experiment in a structured manner to find what gives the best results.

- If you run a weekly newsletter with a low opening rate, there could be multiple factors that caused this outcome, which include:
- The timing of the day or day of the week.
- The quality of the content might not be useful for the audience.
- The amount of information was overwhelming for their attention span.

The best way to find a better way is through following a disciplined routine of doing postmortems to assess the impact of each approach and changing one variable at a time. Sometimes, you just need consistency of weeks and months to build an audience. There are many strategies to build a large community around your brand, as Spotify has done. You could call and interview a sample of your audience, which could give you some fresh ideas on the best time and frequency. Observe what your competitors are doing to gain some ideas and insights.

75. **Match your content to your audience**. Don't send everything to everyone. Be mindful of cultural sensitivities that might trigger certain issues or assumptions.

    For example, if you own a fashion business and you want to run a campaign for your female customers in Saudi, you need to avoid using revealing images that might be acceptable in Europe or the US but could insult your target audience. It is about what is suitable for your customers.

76. **Collaborate with educational institutions**. Whether you are attending career day or conducting joint research and development, it is important to work with universities and colleges so you can access fresh ideas and bright young minds who could join your team and grow[32]. If students aspire to join your operation, word will spread about how great it is to work for your company, not just among their social circles (potential future employees) but among your existing staff too.

32 Moss Kanter, R. "A Four-Point Plan for Linking Innovation, Enterprises, and Jobs," *Harvard Business Review*, March 2012 n.d.

About the Author:

Adel is an experienced entrepreneur and operations expert who has developed a methodology called Skill Up as You Scale Up (SAUS) to give new leaders at startups the confidence and control to deliver results quickly. He has experience in international expansions, managing growth projects, and establishing regional offices. Adel has an educational background in corporate innovation and international business operations and focuses his research and publications on establishing operational excellence and innovation for startups and SMBs.

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