

# **The Founder's Comms Playbook**

**20 Principles for Winning Hearts & Minds**

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Insights from Lulu Cheng Meservey

# 1. The Founder is the Chief Storyteller

- The most successful companies are led by founders with “aura.” This isn’t magic; it’s a direct result of being an exceptional communicator and storyteller.
- You cannot outsource the soul of the company. Your conviction, vision, and authenticity are your most potent assets. They must be communicated by you, in your own voice.
- The goal is to build a movement. To do that, people need to believe in the person leading it. Recruiting top talent, winning customers, and securing investors all hinge on the story you tell.

“A lot of it is pure **honest conviction and confidence**... If you just have complete confidence that this thing that you’re doing is right and you’re going to win and it’s inevitable and you just simply **share that** with people, they will feel that emanating from you and it’s very hard to resist.”



## 2. Strategy is Ends, Ways, Means

- Purpose is the difference between strategic comms and random noise. This classic military framework forces clarity and eliminates wasted motion.



# 3. A Good Plan, Violently Executed Now

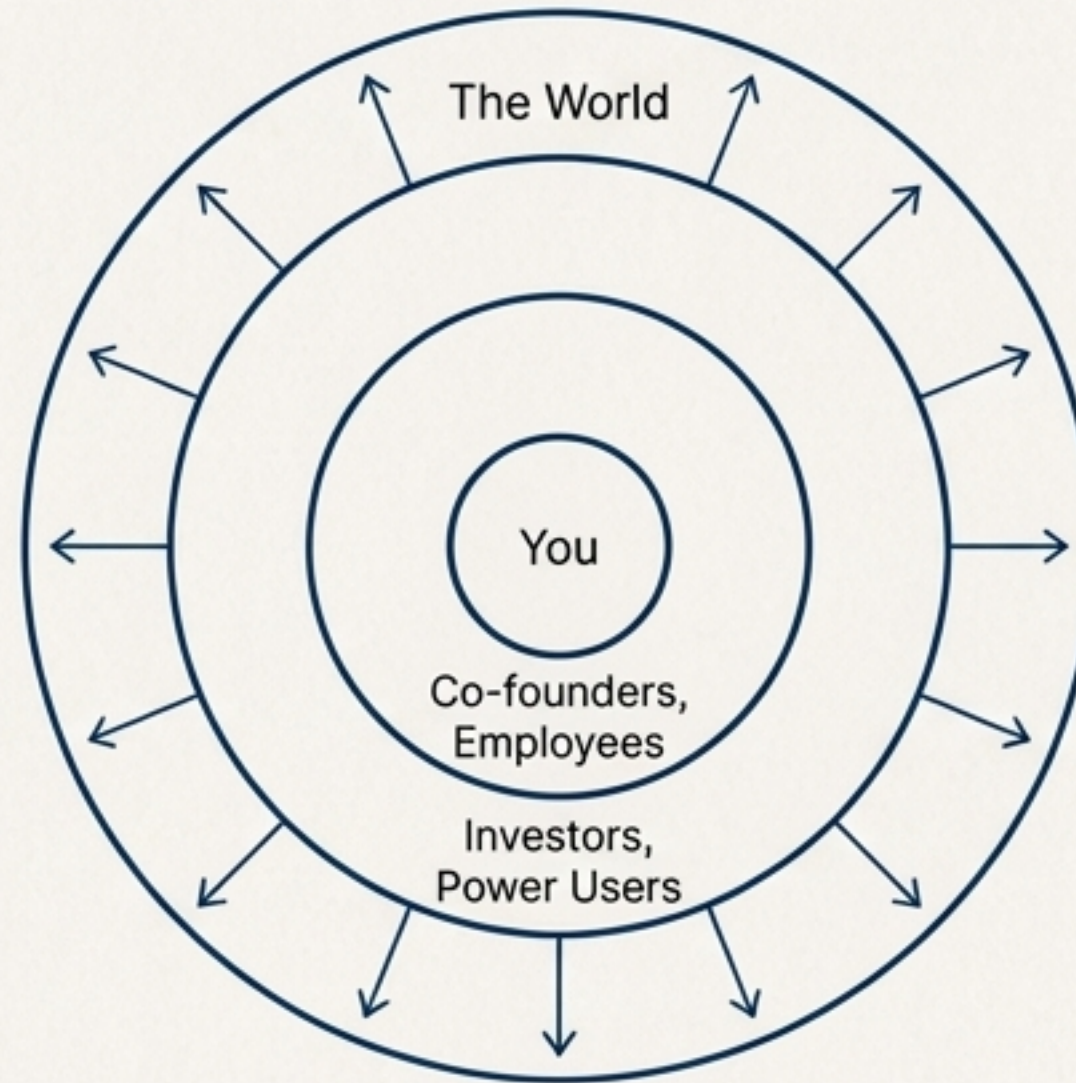
- Most comms failures aren't due to a bad strategy, but a failure to execute.
- Decision paralysis, weak implementation, or waiting for a 'perfect' plan are the true enemies of effective communications.
- Britive swift of effective communications.
- Speed and intensity are your advantages as a startup. Your ability to act decisively while incumbents are stuck in committee is a force multiplier.



**"A good comms plan, violently executed now, is better than a perfect comms plan that languishes in Google Docs."**

## 4. Go Direct: Build Your Own Distribution

- In the past, the game was to win over a few gatekeepers (journalists, editors) to “borrow” their audience. This model is obsolete.
- Today, you must build your own audience. You can’t be dependent on others to tell your story. Create self-sufficiency, then you can choose to collaborate with media from a position of strength, not desperation.

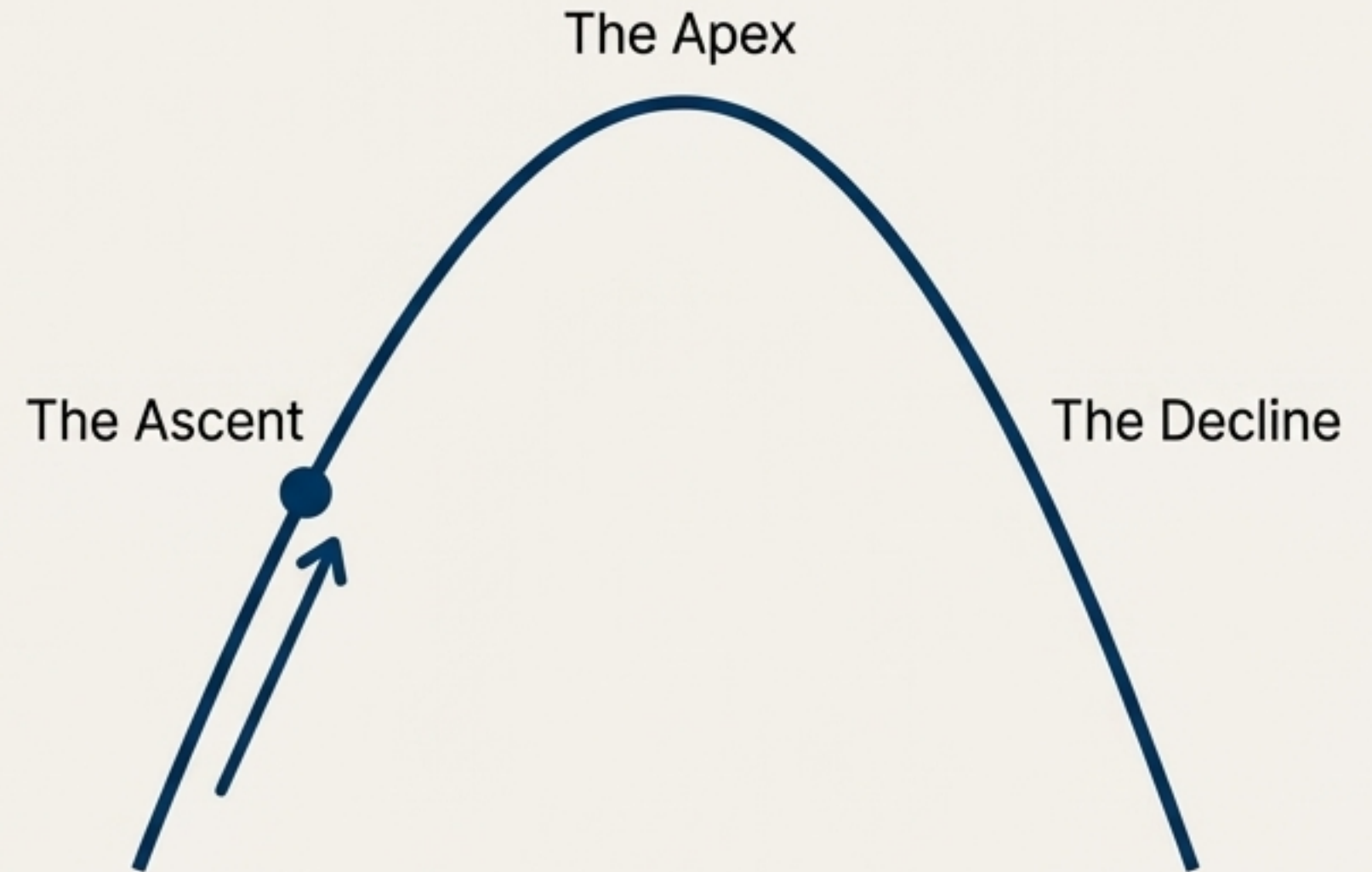


- Start from day one, even before you have a company. Build your audience in concentric circles: start with yourself, then co-founders, employees, investors, power users, and radiate outwards.

**Key Insight:** “Going direct does not mean that you have to boycott the media. It means that you can’t be dependent on others.”

# 5. Master the Narrative Arc

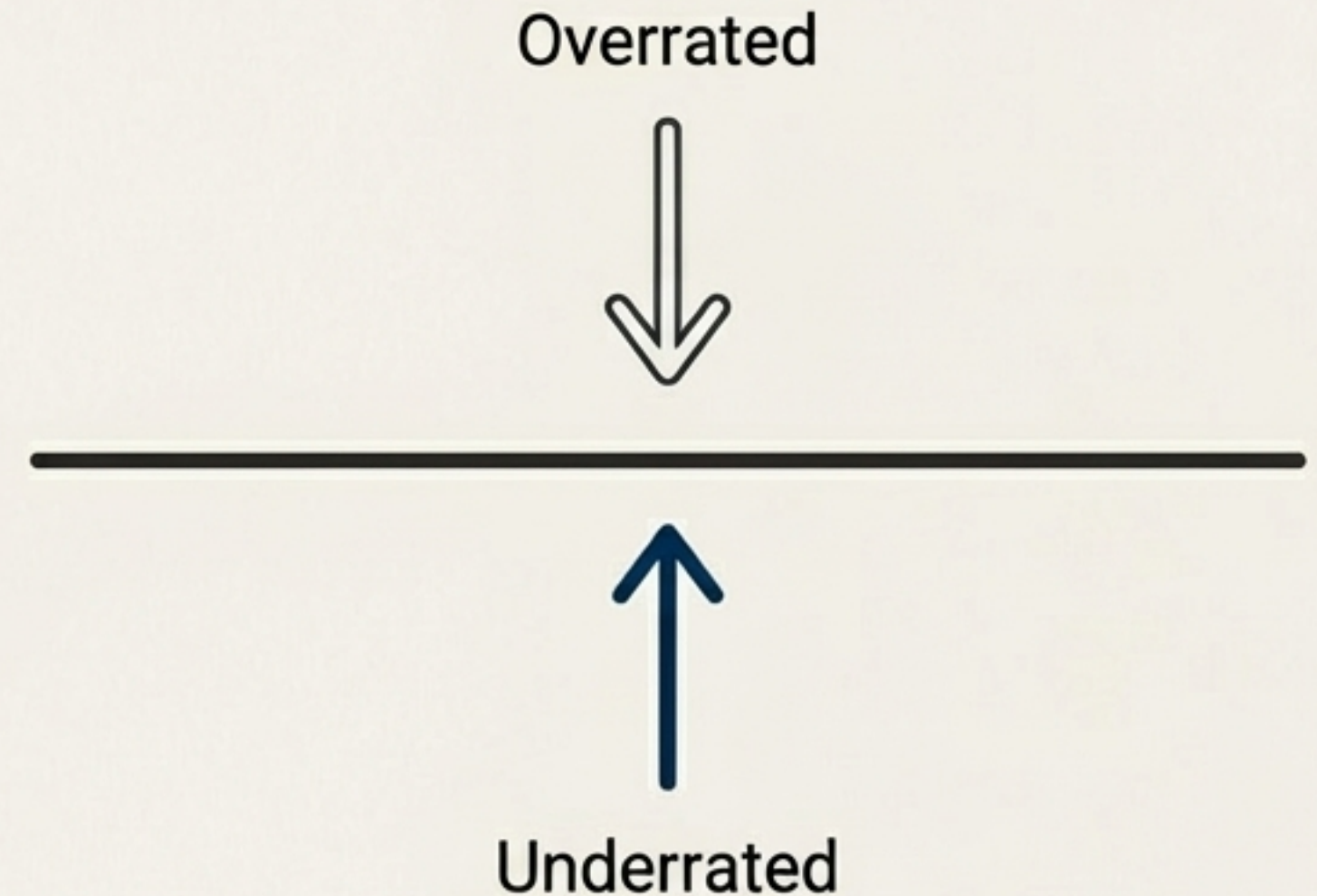
- Humans are hardwired for narrative completion. We instinctively understand that stories have a beginning, a middle (problem), and an end (resolution).
- You don't get to choose *"if there's an arc"*; people will impose one on you. Your agency lies in defining the arc and showing people where you are on it.
- Are you on the ascent, having overcome struggle and destined for greatness? Or have you peaked and are now on the decline? The market's expectation is shaped by the story you tell.



"If the story was Icarus then flew happily away, it's not a story. Or if somebody crashes down and doesn't make their way back up... we would not be able to sleep. People would hate that movie and not know why. It's like this uncanny valley of a story."

## 6. Aim to Be Underrated

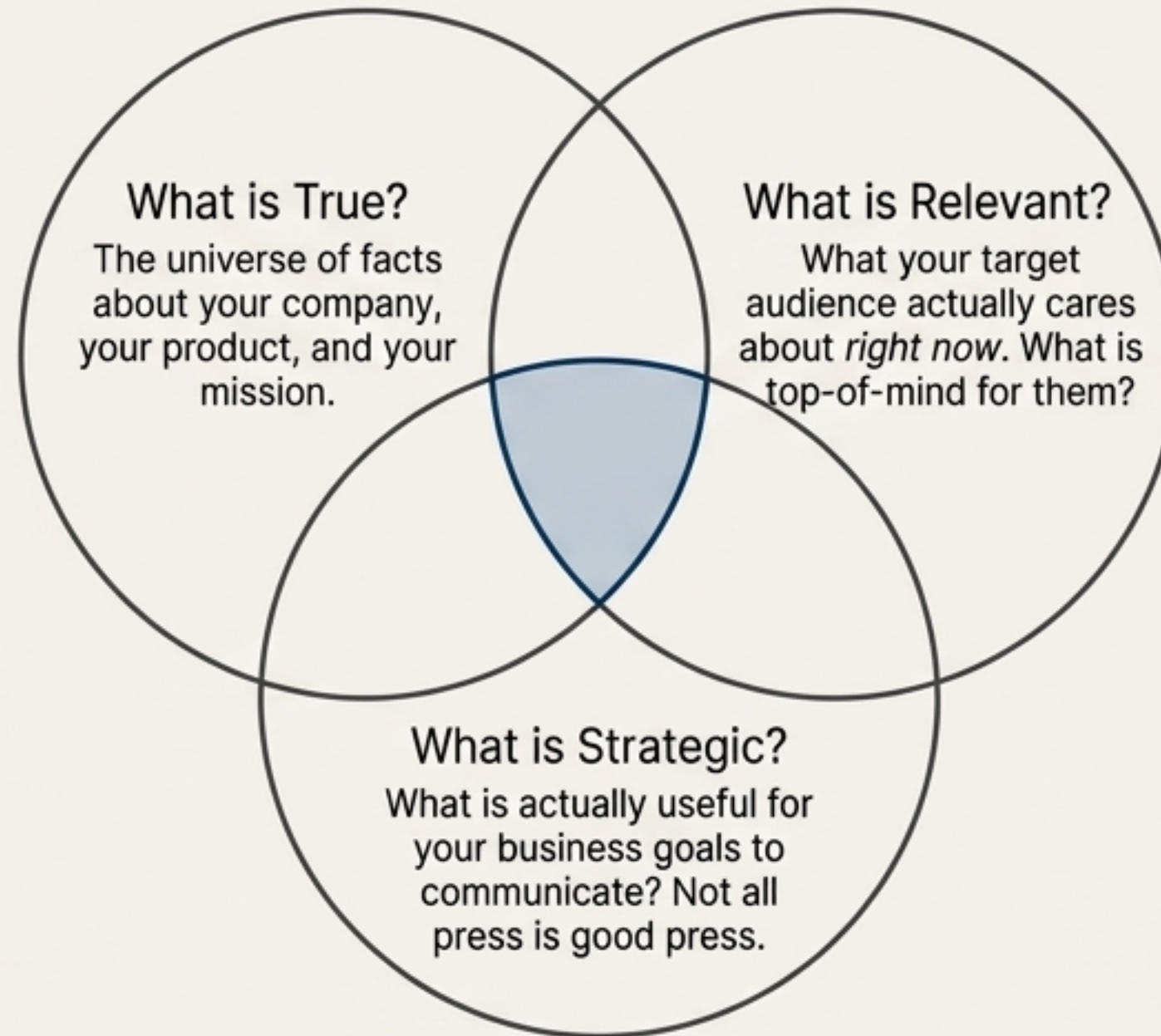
- Public opinion has a “homeostatic set point”—the level of success and celebration people feel you deserve.
- If you are perceived as being *above* that set point, you’re “overrated,” an insult. People will want to bring you down.
- If you are perceived as being *below* it, you’re “underrated,” a compliment. People will feel an urge to close the gap and champion your success. They become evangelists.



**Key Insight:** “You want people to think that your true value is even higher than the market is placing on you right now... your best days are ahead of you.”

# 7. Find the Venn Diagram

- The most common mistake is talking only about what *\*you* care about. The real story lives in the overlap of three distinct circles.



Core Principle: "Don't tell the story that's in your circle... Don't tell the story that's in the other person's circle... Tell the story that's in the Venn diagram."

# 8. Target Cultural Erogenous Zones

Your audience has things they deeply care about, and things they don't. You are not going to change their fundamental passions or worldview.

Your job is to understand these “**cultural erogenous zones**”—the topics, values, and ideas that elicit a strong intellectual or emotional response.

Frame your message to connect with what they're already passionate about. Create the API or bridge from their world to yours. It's not “build it and they will come”; it's “go to them and connect.”

“It's so much easier to take what they're passionate about and understand it, and then convince them that if they care about that, then they should care about your thing because of this connection.”

# 9. Fight Stories with Stories

- Our brains have receptors shaped for stories, not for statistics. An accusation is almost always a story; a defense is too often just a statistic. This is a losing battle.
- The most powerful statistic is not as powerful as the median story. When an opponent uses a narrative against you, you must counter with a more compelling narrative of your own.
- If the facts are on your side, better stories can always be found. Don't just present data; frame it within a human story that connects emotionally.



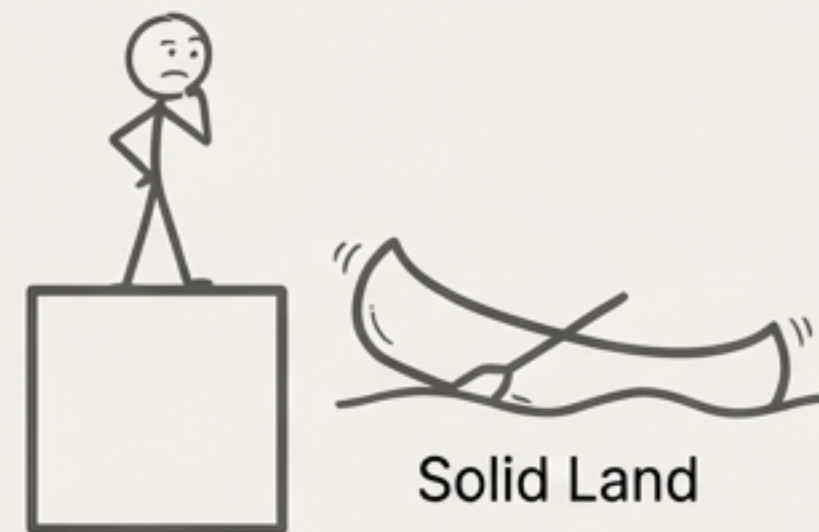
**Concrete Example:** "During the NAFTA debates... pro-trade arguments used GDP figures. Anti-trade arguments told the story of 'Shane, he's got 12 children, he just lost his job.' People will do anything to help Shane."

# 10. Harness Human Psychology

- Too many founders go against the grain of basic human psychology. A key principle is **Prospect Theory**: people are twice as motivated to avoid a loss as they are to achieve a gain.

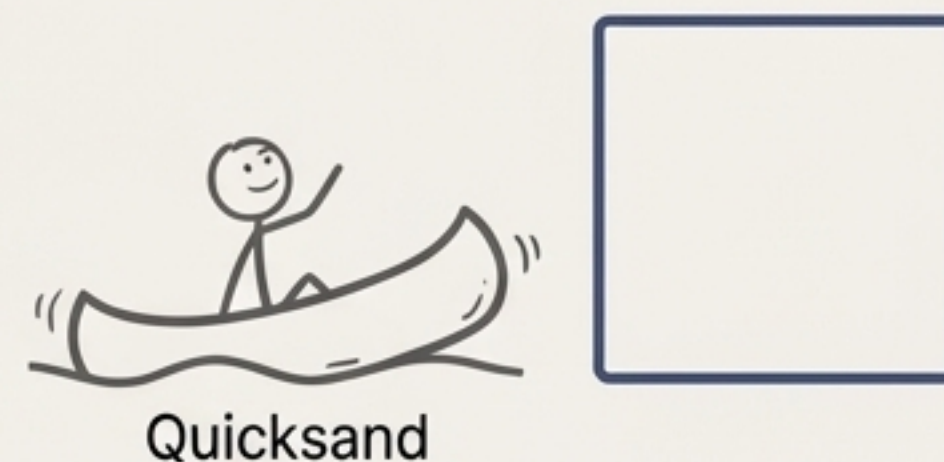
## Wrong Approach:

“What you have now is mid. Switch to our new, unproven product and you might get something better.” This frames the customer on solid land and asks them to jump into your rickety canoe.



## Right Approach:

“Your current state is the real risk. Your status quo is quicksand, and your competitors are moving to firm land. We offer you safety and a path to leadership.” This reframes *them* as being in the rickety canoe, and you are the solid land.



**Key Insight:** Frame the status quo as the losing state. Your product is not just an upgrade; it's a rescue from inevitable decline.

# 11. Authenticity is Your Superpower

- You must lean into the archetype that you truly are. Everything has two sides. Trying to be someone you're not comes across as uncanny and untrustworthy.
- If you're a remote technical genius, don't try to be a warm, fuzzy manager. Frame your strength: "This is a genius in the lab cooking up something amazing, and you can be part of this team." You'll attract the right people who want exactly that.
- The version of you the world sees is a compressed model. You have influence over which true, authentic traits you choose to amplify. Highlight the traits most relevant and useful for the business.

"What you don't want to do is bait and switch someone into joining the company because they think that they're working for this type of guy, and then that guy just doesn't actually show up to work."



## 12. Choose Your Words Carefully

- Words that seem similar can evoke completely different mindsets. Each word in an important message should be load-bearing.
- The analogy you choose frames the entire problem and pre-determines the solution people will favor. Your framing dictates their response.

### Frame 1: "Crime is a wild beast rampaging through the city."

The implied solution is to crack down, use force, and bring in the National Guard.



### Frame 2: "Crime is a disease spreading through neighborhoods."

The implied solution is social workers, rehabilitation, and treating "patients."



# 13. Recruit Like Napoleon

- **Frame the Mission:** Napoleon, one of history's greatest recruiters, gave his men a cause bigger than themselves. At the Battle of the Pyramids, he told his soldiers, "From the top of these pyramids, 40,000 years of history are looking down on you."
- **Brand the Team:** He branded a high-casualty unit "les terribles" (the men without fear), turning a suicide mission into an elite honor that attracted volunteers.
- **Lead from the Front:** He was called "the little corporal" because he aimed cannons himself. He was one of them. The greatest founders are still in the code, in the designs, in the trenches with their team.

**Give your team a grander mission, a legendary identity, and prove you are one of them.**

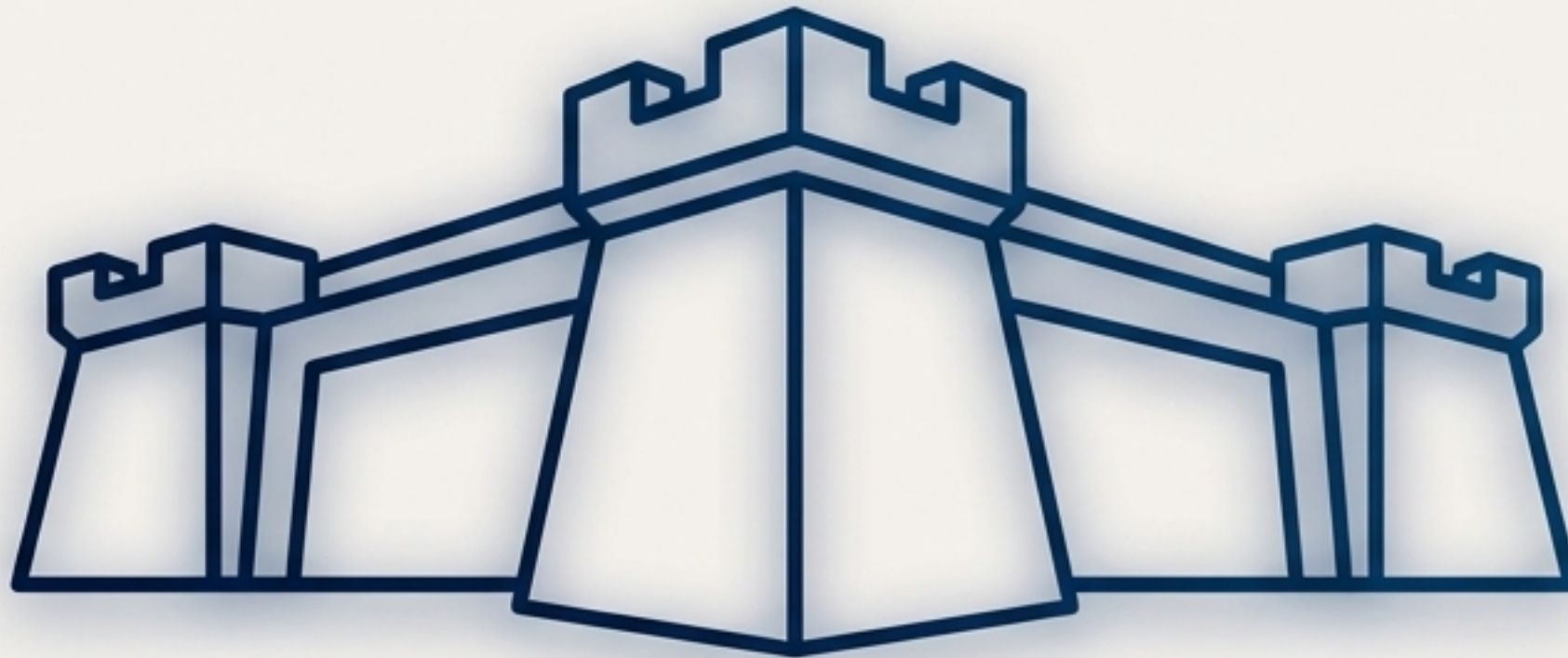
# 14. Build a True Fanbase

- Followers are not enough. To survive long-term, you need fanatics who will evangelize for you, defend you, and stick with you.
- The K-pop industry has perfected the science of fandom. K-pop fans buy out stadiums, raise millions for charity, take over Twitter on command, and sell out any product their idols touch.
- The key is not to be a niche product. K-pop bands are multi-platform and multi-genre, incorporating music, dance, visual spectacle, memes, and comedy to create a universe of content for fans to inhabit.



# 15. Develop Strong Deterrence

- The goal is to signal that attacking you will be painful and costly. It's not about being aggressive; it's about establishing that you are not a soft target.
- This is achieved by demonstrating you will respond to material, unfair attacks—not out of emotion, but as a matter of principle.
- Some founders, like Palmer Luckey, have “perfect deterrence.” The market knows that if you take a meaningful shot at him, he will come after you, guaranteed. As a result, people stop taking shots.



**Analogy:** From *The Three-Body Problem*: The aliens are completely deterred by the one human leader they believe will 100% pull the trigger. They call his bluff when power passes to someone with weak deterrence, and disaster follows.



## 16. Master the “Pre-buttal”

- A lie makes its way around the world before the truth can get its pants on. Being **first to frame the narrative** is a massive advantage.
- If you know what critics are going to say against you, say it yourself first. **Address all of their ammunition**, either owning it or diffusing it. By the time they get their turn, they have nothing left to say.

### **Concrete Example: The final rap battle in *8 Mile*.**

Eminem's character goes first and lays out **every single negative thing** his opponent could possibly say about him—he's white, he's poor, his friend shot himself, his ex-girlfriend cheated.

**He takes all the weapons away,**  
and his opponent is left speechless.

# 17. When Crisis Hits, Break the Nose Back

- When you suffer a material reputational blow, the instinct is to hope it goes away. It won't.
- You must handle it in the moment. If you break your nose, you have to break it back right away.
- Waiting allows the damage to set. If you decide to fix it years later, you have to break the nose again from scratch, it is far more painful. Address the issue immediately and aggressively while things are already broken.



**Key Takeaway: Don't let reputational damage fester.  
Deal with it head-on, right now.**

## 18. The Art of the Apology

1. **Say the words.** Use 'I'm sorry' or 'I apologize.' Not 'We regret.' It must come from a human.
2. **Be specific.** Explain what happened and where you went wrong. Give an explanation, not an excuse. Use active tense, not 'mistakes were made.'
3. **Berate yourself so they don't have to.** Show empathy. Acknowledge the full impact. Don't minimize the damage.
4. **Make amends and follow through.** State exactly what you will do to fix it. Do not mortgage your future credibility by overpromising. Then, do what you said you would do, and follow up to confirm it's done.

'If you are going to eat shit, don't nibble.' - Ben Horowitz

# 19. Kill Corporate Speak

- Corporate speak exists for one reason: risk minimization. It's language designed to be so bland and impersonal that it's hard to get in trouble for.
- It's also the result of "corporate ancestors," where people entering a role cosplay how they think a professional is supposed to sound, perpetuating a hollow, meaningless cycle.
- It is soulless, robotic, and destroys trust. People don't trust institutions; they trust other people. To build trust, you have to sound like a person.

synergize forward-looking paradigms to leverage  
bleeding-edge core competencies across the value chain  
utilizing best-in-class deliverables and scalable strategic  
alignment initiatives to maximize shareholder value  
through cross-functional synergy realization and robust  
optimization frameworks...



Practical Tip: "Read it out loud. You can feel the cringe like surge through your body. If it's something that you would never say, then you won't be able to say it out loud."

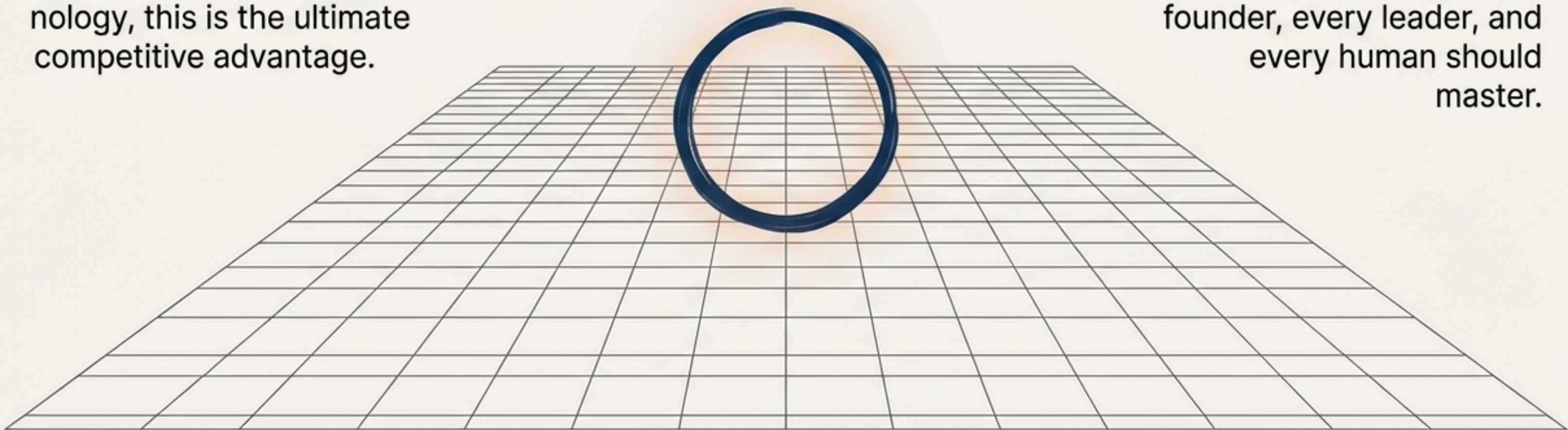
## 20. Comms is the Final Human Bastion

AI will be smarter and better than us in many ways. Many skills will be automated and commoditized.

However, the ability to persuade, to win over, to build movements, and to make other human beings fall in love with an idea will remain a uniquely human skill.

In a world of advancing technology, this is the ultimate competitive advantage.

This is the skill that every founder, every leader, and every human should master.



“10 years from now, 50 years from now, the ability to persuade and win over and make other people fall in love for other humans will still be uniquely human... I have very high conviction that this is the ultimate skill that everybody should practice.”