

## All Aboard for Scaling? Set the Tracks & Fuel the Engine with Culture

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Scaling ventures are associated with ‘skyrocketing’ to growth. However, who takes the train? And, why? It sounds slower (chug-chug!), but this ‘take-off’ to encounter scaling is not always the best mode of travel. After innovating a product or service, a scaling venture rapidly attempts to capture its market by growing exponentially, hiring rapidly, implementing new structures, processes and systems, entering new markets and advancing their innovation pipeline. This results in internal chaos unfolding. Why? Founders and managers forget to set the tracks and fuel the engine with culture for scaling.

In a recent study of ‘serial scalers’ (managers with subsequent serial scaling experiences, for examples CMOs or CFOs), they highlighted the journeys that derailed, ran out of fuel or did not make it on time. Intriguingly, 100% of these serial scalers stated the reason this occurs is that culture is lost or left at the ticket desk. Serial scalers set the tracks, so individuals will decide if they wish to board. Others may disembark, as they no longer align with the destination. Serial scalers believe they must be good conductors by avoiding excess baggage impeding the journey and connect the carriages for a smooth journey. It must be asked what is the “culture debt” of this venture, as Dharmesh Shah (CTO, HubSpot) titles it. What is fascinating from this research is that new routes await beyond this destination only if founders and managers follow a manual that allows for some checks when embarking on scaling:

**Set the Tracks** – Serial scalers educate the CEO or founder to determine and articulate the ventures values. New tracks reinstate the venture vision and values that support this new journey, including transparency, connectivity and communication. This change may influence old hires to leave, as they do not align to this new destination and may become ineffective or excess baggage that slows the journey. These tracks support the journey similar to venture values that influence the right fuel required or the right venture practices needed to get there.

**Connect the Carriages & Fuel the Engine** – The carriages of new and founding employees are bridged by communication through cadence. When trains enter a dark tunnel or meet unexpected delays, drivers communicate to inform passengers about what lies ahead and why their decision to plan a re-route but on the same tracks, will still get them there. If not, some carriages may get lost or passengers disembark. The venture loses information and important talent. Serial scalers apply agreed cadence, for example, regular town halls, opportunities for cross-functional learning and off-site meets, generating ongoing information sharing and communication to bridge new carriages. This creates a venture in which employees’ state: “I don’t need to wait for my manager to tell me!” Employees enjoy self-rule, as they are equipped with the right fuel to empower them to make decisions, socialise along the carriages and prevent a braking in the pace.

**Destination** – Serial scalers begin to introduce processes and systems in their functional roles to ensure efficiency – but this journey allows for “the agility of a start-up world,” according to serial scalers. By setting the vision, values and practices to encourage communication and decision-making, serial scalers push employees to exploit the current innovation but to explore new opportunities that branch out from these tracks. Similarly, Des Traynor, a co-founder of Intercom, demands people to ask “accelerating questions” that action ways to move forwards. This differentiates the venture instead of being a “big company that has lost its way.” Serial scalers avoid the ‘one-hit wonder’ or the road to nowhere that can exist after the destination of scaling if they fuel

up correctly and utilise their carriages for the next destination.

Scaling certainly disrupts the rhythm of a start-up's culture, which is responsive and tightly bonded. Serial scalers take the train because they know culture is powerful. They admit: "it's the soft stuff that's the hardest." However, taking the train opens opportunities for new routes of scaling beyond the first destination. As entrepreneurs and practitioners (or serial entrepreneurs and serial scalers), we need to think beyond one innovation and one destination. If you set the tracks, connect the carriages and fuel the engine, setting your culture may be a 'chug-chug' but it influences faster future routes beyond the destination. You avoid an unsuccessful rocket launch. Moreover, by hiring a serial scaler, ventures dodge the bullet of bureaucracy, toxic or non-existent cultures. Also, a wipe out of an agile venture that is demanded in a very dynamic world today.

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