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If every day is an emergency, the emergency is not the problem.

It is 8:33 and someone is already looking for a material that should have been available. It is unclear whether it was ordered, when it should arrive or who should have checked. Meanwhile, a customer calls to ask about the status of their order. Sales gives one answer, production has another, and no one in the warehouse has yet been informed of the latest change. While three suppliers demand payment. At 10, a priority changes.

A decision made quickly by the owner forces three people to interrupt what they were doing to deal with something that has suddenly become urgent. One task is suspended, another is delayed, and someone will need to remember to return to it later. Before lunch, an error emerges that has happened before. They look for whoever made it, correct the document, make phone calls, and someone checks everything again. The problem is solved. In the afternoon another urgent issue arrives. Then another. By the end of the day, people are tired, some planned activities have not been completed and the general feeling is of having worked a great deal without really moving forward.

Somewhere, sooner or later, the conclusion also arrives: “The problem is that people here do not want to work.” Sound familiar?

Because when days like these become normal, before blaming people for the chaos we should look at who built - or failed to build - the system in which those people are working.

When emergency becomes the way of working

In many businesses, this is not a particularly chaotic period or an exception. It is simply the normal way of working. It is unclear who should decide what. People without the necessary skills hold roles because of connections, favouritism or seniority, while others, perfectly capable, cannot work independently. There are managers handling important activities who must ask the owner’s permission even for an ordinary utility bill. Priorities change during the day, information passes through phone calls and messages, and too many activities still depend on the memory or availability of the person “who knows how it is done”.

So people wait, chase confirmations, interrupt what they were doing, correct familiar errors and solve problems every day that will return unchanged.

Through repetition, all this ceases to be perceived as abnormal. It becomes “our industry”. It becomes “that is how it works here”. It becomes “you have to be flexible”. It even becomes a source of pride when someone manages, once again, to save the situation at the last minute.

Emergency ceases to be an exception and becomes the company’s operating model.

But being good at putting out fires does not make an organisation efficient. If the same fires keep starting, the capability to develop is not running faster with the extinguisher. It is eliminating what keeps igniting them.

Someone is responsible for the chaos

At this point, it is worth saying plainly: if chaos has become the normal way of working, ultimate responsibility lies with whoever leads the company. Not the warehouse worker chasing information. Not the employee waiting for yet another approval. Not the manager unable to decide without asking for confirmation. If roles, responsibilities, processes and decision-making levels are not clear, documented and actually applied, someone has not built the organisation they should have built. If every decision still goes through the owner, the problem is not that people "lack autonomy".

It is that autonomy has never truly been granted. If managers do not know how to manage people, priorities, conflicts or performance, complaining about management is not enough: someone chose them, placed them in those roles and let them work without ensuring they had adequate skills, tools and training. The same applies to micromanagement. An entrepreneur who spends the day checking orders, authorising routine expenditure, resolving operational problems and continually taking over from employees is not "keeping everything under control". They are compensating with their own presence for what they have failed to make autonomous.

The problem therefore doubles, because all the time absorbed by operations is taken away from the work no one else can do in their place: setting direction, building structure and governance, choosing and developing the right people, allocating capital and resources, protecting margins and economic sustainability, overseeing risks and priorities, understanding market changes, creating partnerships, identifying growth opportunities, and deciding where to invest and innovate.

If the owner is doing the work others should already know how to do, who is doing the owner's work? Their company slows down, loses opportunities, continues living from one emergency to the next and becomes increasingly dependent on their presence. At that point, saying "if I am not here, nothing works" does not demonstrate how indispensable the entrepreneur is. It is proof of an organisation that has not been made capable of functioning without their continuous intervention.

The nails in the coffin

Companies are rarely undermined by a single spectacular mistake. Much more often, they are weakened slowly, one nail at a time. A manager chosen for loyalty rather than competence. A process no one has ever really defined. A decision that still depends on the owner. A known problem tolerated because "for now we can manage it". Information that does not circulate, departments operating as separate worlds, inadequate tools, capable people who stop making suggestions because nobody listens anyway. A culture in which avoiding a mistake is more convenient than taking responsibility.

Taken individually, these may seem manageable problems. The danger arises when they feed one another. Weak management generates worse decisions. Fragile processes increase errors and

checks. A lack of autonomy feeds micromanagement. Micromanagement slows the organisation and strips people of responsibility. The wrong culture hides problems until they become costly. Those who know me know that I simply call these environments: sludge.

A company works like an ecosystem. Strategy, leadership, people, skills, processes, responsibilities, information, technology, finance, governance and corporate culture are not independent elements. They are pillars of the same system, and weakness in one compromises the performance of the others. You can invest in the best technology and entrust it to the wrong processes. You can hire excellent people and place them in a culture that rewards obedience rather than responsibility. You can have a good product and lose margin through operational inefficiencies. You can train managers and continue stripping them of authority by intervening in every decision.

It is therefore not enough to ask what is not working. You need to see the complete picture and understand what prevents the different elements of the company from working together. And among those pillars, one can never be treated as optional: human capital. Not because “people come first” is a nice phrase to hang on the wall, but because people turn strategy, processes, technology and investments into results. Corporate culture should do precisely this: create an environment in which competence, responsibility, collaboration, autonomy, dialogue and improvement are the normal way of working.

Otherwise, you can keep removing one nail at a time. Meanwhile, someone else will keep driving more in.

Chaos is not free

The problem with organisational chaos is that it does not arrive with an invoice labelled “inefficiency”. It disperses through the income statement and becomes difficult to recognise. It hides in time spent searching for information, waiting for authorisation, chasing colleagues, correcting errors, redoing activities and attending pointless meetings; it is in overtime, urgent purchases, waste, additional transport, delays, lost opportunities and the hours managers and owners spend solving problems that should never have reached their desks. Let us take a very simple example. In a company of 30 people, if each loses an average of 90 minutes a day to waiting, interruptions, errors, rework and disorganisation, around 220 working days absorb 9,900 hours a year.

At an average company cost of €30 an hour, we are already talking about almost €300,000 of working capacity used without creating value. And that is only part of it. It does not include the margin lost through a late delivery, a departing customer, an eroding reputation, a decision made too late, a capable person who tires of it and leaves, or an opportunity no one had time to see.

The real cost can be much higher precisely because a significant part is never accounted for as inefficiency. And this is where many companies make another mistake: they confuse cost with investment. Training a manager costs money. Redesigning a process costs money. Bringing in a more capable person may cost more. Implementing a suitable tool, automating an activity or devoting time to building a better structure costs money. But spending €30,000 to eliminate an inefficiency that

absorbs €100,000 every year does not mean increasing costs by €30,000.

It means investing capital to recover value and productive capacity. The return on investment determines whether that expenditure creates or destroys value. Saving, by contrast, can become extremely expensive when it means not training, not hiring, not innovating, not building structure and continually postponing what would make the company work better. Not investing in improving the company does not mean saving. The real cost is continuing to lose money because you did not invest where it was needed.

Do you still have the nerve to blame employees?

At this point, the question becomes uncomfortable. If you recognise that you have created an operating model of emergencies and normalised chaos, do you still have the nerve to blame employees?

You cannot leave someone working in sludge and then complain that they do not run fast enough. You cannot demand autonomy after teaching people to ask permission for everything, expect initiative after correcting every decision made without the owner, or responsibility after building a system in which authority always remains elsewhere. Sooner or later, anyone leading a company must have the humility to recognise their own responsibilities too. Entrepreneurial humility is not weakness. It is the ability to recognise that something is not working, even when that means questioning one's own decisions, habits and beliefs.

Without this ability, every problem will continue to have an external culprit and no cause will truly be eliminated.

Being an entrepreneur does not mean having people work for you while you check that they do what they should. It means working to build, together with them, an organisation in which they can produce results, take responsibility, grow and contribute without continually having to fight the system itself.

You can keep blaming employees, the market, the lack of good people, the industry or changing times. Or you can stop blaming others and do the work that falls to you.

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