



How to Deal with a Startup Co-Founder Who Isn't Pulling Their Weight

by Dennis Hammer

You've heard this story before: A startup founder brings on a co-founder to fill a critical role, supply some cash, or just because he doesn't want to work alone.

Everything's fine for a while, until the co-founder slowly begins to contribute less and less. He misses deadlines, doesn't attend meetings, and won't answer emails. He doesn't seem to produce anything anymore, but he has plenty of excuses.

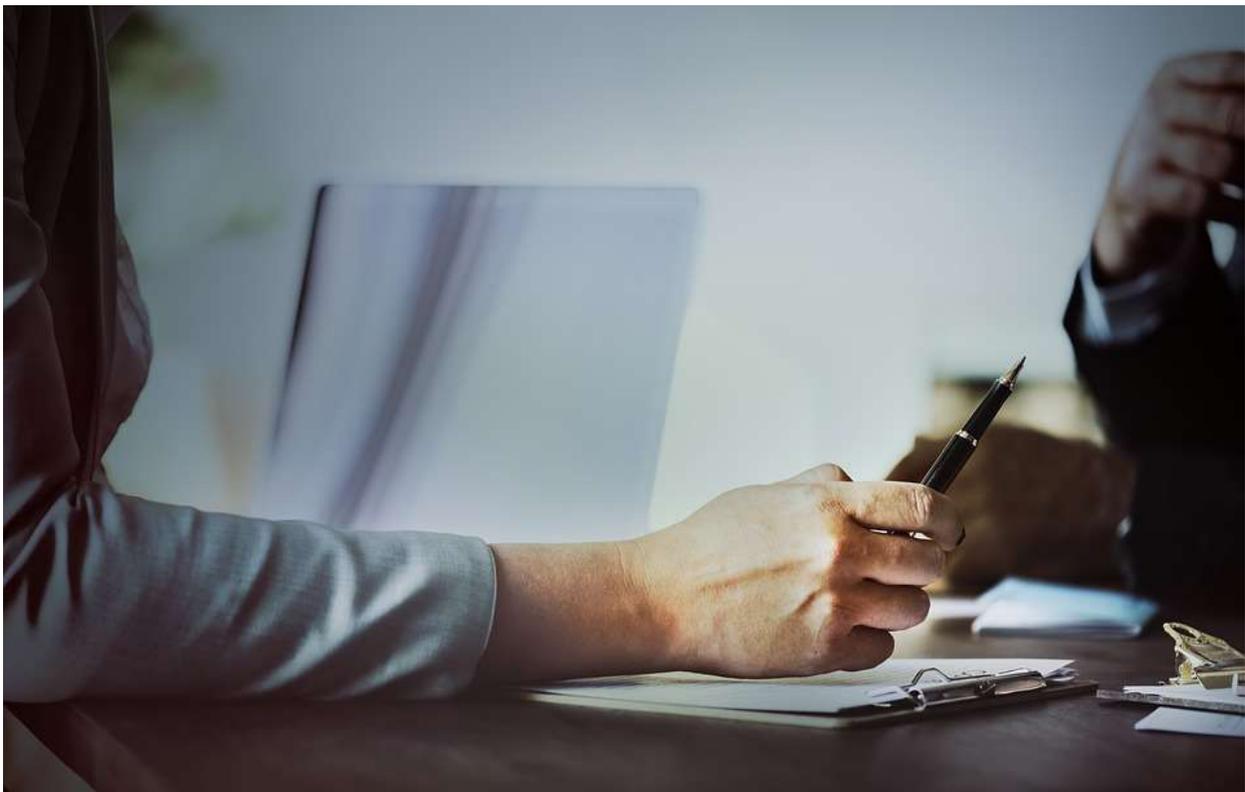
VC and entrepreneurship professor [Dr. Sean Wise says this is actually a common problem](#). "Of the last 23 startups my fund invested in, 20% lost a founder within the first 12 months, even more had issues with 'under-contributing founders.'"

You work hard, often giving up nights and weekends to build your dream, so it's frustrating and maddening when your co-founder doesn't pull their weight, especially when you're [looking down a runway](#).

In this post, we'll give you a strategy to deal with a non-performing co-founder.

1. Put Everything on the Table
2. Determine Why Your Co-Founder Checked Out
3. Align Your Visions
4. Consult Your Stakeholders and Mentors
5. Make a Hard Decision
6. Set a Date to Re-Evaluate the Situation
7. Address the Problem Right Away

Put Everything on the Table



If you're unsatisfied with your co-founder's contributions, speak up right away. Don't let this fester or you'll start to resent the entire company and dread going to work.

Speak candidly about your concerns. Don't blame or disparage your co-founder. Don't *attack* or declare ultimatums. Instead, approach the situation with grace and dignity. Keep in mind that your co-founder's inattention may be out of their control.

Open the conversation with your observations. Say that you've noticed their general disinterest and that you'd like to help them rediscover their enthusiasm for the project.

Your co-founder will likely become defensive (who wouldn't?), so reassure them that your discussion is safe. Explain that you aren't looking to force anyone out and that your goal is to [support the team](#) and the business' health.

Determine Why Your Co-Founder Checked Out

If your co-founder isn't forthcoming about the reason for their absence, come right out and ask.

[Startup partnership](#) is a marriage in its own way, so your co-founder owes you an honest answer. You'll need to understand their inattention so you can determine if the situation is recoverable.

Here are some common reasons co-founders stop pulling their weight:

Personality Conflicts - It's not unusual for two people to start a company together only to find out later on that they can't work together. If your co-founder doesn't like working with you (for whatever reason – it's not necessarily someone's fault), he may lose his enthusiasm for the company.

Ownership Resentment – Your co-founder may not be happy with the size of his share of the company, especially if you have a larger piece. They might also be unhappy about leadership decisions you've made that they don't agree with.

Lack of Attention – If your co-founder participates in other projects or startups, he may not be able to give your startup the attention it deserves. This is a big problem for startup founders who continue to work full time jobs.

Personal Problems – Your co-founder may be dealing with things in his personal life that you can't see, like relationship or medical problems. These issues *will* bleed into work.

No Motivation – Your co-founder might lack the motivation to keep working. Maybe you hit a certain level of success he's happy with. Maybe the startup life is harder than he anticipated.

Lack of Skill – It's not unusual for a co-founder to overstate their abilities and connections, then find themselves facing problems they can't solve.

Boredom – This one seems simple, but it happens all the time. Sometimes people just get bored with one idea and want to move on to something different.

Your co-founder may have a unique reason for their disinterest. Keep an open mind and don't dismiss their concerns. You can't shame or tough-love your co-founder into re-devoting themselves to your startup.

Align Your Visions



Next, discuss your shared vision for the startup. Make sure you're both still on the same page.

For instance, if you plan to take the company to IPO but your co-founder only wants a small lifestyle business, there's probably no salvaging the relationship. Those goals are completely incompatible.

Work through your company's future together. Where do you want to take the business? What will your product look like? Who will you hire and when? What does success look like? What's your [exit strategy](#)?

If you agree on your startup's future, it could be worth your time to re-engage your co-founder. But if your goals are too far apart, it's time to part ways.

Consult Your Stakeholders and Mentors

Before you make any decisions, talk to anyone else who has a significant stake in the company or anyone you consider an advisor. They may have creative ideas to restructure the company and/or increase the co-founder's engagement.

Important: If you've already hired a team, keep them out of these conversations. If you admit your concerns, you could sabotage your co-founder's authority.

Make a Hard Decision



Hopefully you can re-engage your co-founder and bring back the team that birthed your startup, but that isn't always the case. Sometimes a lazy co-founder just has to go.

Before you make any decisions, ask yourself if the company can move forward without the co-founder. Do they bring an especially valuable skill that would be too expensive to buy? Do they have valuable connections you couldn't get on your own? If the co-founder left, what would you have to replace?

If the co-founder brings something unique to the table, you might want to push for a solution, even if you don't expect it to work. But if your co-founder checked out a while ago and doesn't help the company anymore, it's best to shed the weight quickly.

Firing a co-founder isn't easy. Even if they're willing to walk away peacefully, it'll be the most awkward conversation of your entire life. Hopefully they'll see where it's going and bow out gracefully, but prepare yourself to explicitly say "I'll be working alone from this point forward."

A word of caution: Your co-founder may have claim to a portion of the company and its intellectual property, even if you haven't created a legal entity yet. Before you kick your co-founder out, have a discussion with your lawyer.

Set a Date to Re-Evaluate the Situation

If you've chosen to give your co-founder another chance, be explicit about your expectations for each other. Everyone's performance is up for evaluation – even the founders.

Set a date to meet and discuss each other's contributions to the company. This creates a sense of urgency for your co-founder to correct his behavior. Encourage your co-founder to rate you as well.

Avoid nebulous phrases like “We should both give this project more effort” or “We have to meet more deadlines.” You can't track or measure things like that.

Instead, set clear expectations, like “We'll both work at least 10 hours and meet for at least 30 minutes per week. Each Monday, we'll both document our action items to be completed by the end of the week.”

That's just a sample. You can create whatever plan works for you, just make sure your responsibilities are measurable so you know when one of you fails.

That said, don't become your co-founder's manager. Don't organize his tasks and deadlines. Don't follow up with his commitments. He's a *co-founder*. He shouldn't need you to crack a whip to get him to contribute. If you think you'll have to *force* him to participate, reconsider splitting up.

Address the Problem Right Away

It's never fun to address someone's poor performance, especially when that person is someone who played a role in the birth of your startup.

But as a founder, it's your job to ensure the health and success of the company. Don't sit by idly and hope the problem solves itself, because it definitely won't. Face the situation head on. Whether you can solve the problem peacefully or not, you can't wait.

Need advice working with your co-founder or anyone else on your team? Get advice from the experts in the [10xU community](#).

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