

When Leaders Start Wearing Too Many Hats



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Over the past few years, I've seen the same pattern in different companies.

On a slide, it looks like "lean" and "efficient."

Up close, it looks like one or two people quietly carrying more hats than is sustainable until something gives.

One QA Director I spoke with had been at his company for four years.

About 110 people.

Very lean team.

He kept asking for approval to hire more, but the answer was always no.

He tried to promote people on his team to keep them engaged, and that was turned down too.

Meanwhile, the work kept coming.

He was working 12 to 14 hour days just to keep up.

From the outside, it was easy to say, "We're getting a lot out of this team."

From the inside, he was exhausted.

He finally quit and went to find a company with more reasonable expectations.

The original company?

They ended up bringing in three consultants to cover what he had been doing, just to protect the rest of the team from burning out in the same way.

It was an expensive way to learn that “one more year with the same structure” wasn’t actually cheaper.

Another version of this shows up with founders.

I think of one founder and CEO at a roughly 30 person medical device company.

He knew he needed a head of RA/QA.

He said it out loud more than once.

But in the meantime he was:

Running the company

Overseeing very expensive RA consultants, which meant several meetings and calls every week

Heading up clinical trials

Working on the next round of funding so they could grow into new markets

Every one of those hats felt important.

None of them felt optional.

Because his time was pulled in so many directions, submission deadlines slipped.

Product launches were delayed.

The next round of funding dragged on for almost a year longer than it needed to.

At one point, I suggested a different path.

A single person who would cost much less than the current setup and who would take ownership of RA, QA, and Clinical so he could focus on running the company.

It wasn't a magic fix.

But it would have taken several hats off his head and given the work a clear owner.

He didn't have the bandwidth to follow through.

A year later, he was still on the same hamster wheel.

Same hats.

Same pressure.

Same delays.

When leaders start wearing too many hats, important work doesn't stop getting done.

It just gets done later, under more stress, with less room for error.

The costs show up in ways that are easy to explain away:

A missed submission date

A delayed launch

A funding process that takes months longer than it needed to

A QA or RA leader who quietly burns out and walks away

If you recognize this mix of hats in your own situation, and they're starting to feel heavy, I'd be happy to talk through what I've seen work and what hasn't.