VISIONARY
PROBLEMS

VISIONARY PROBLEMS FIELD GUIDE   FOUNDER · OWNER · CEO · COO · CRO

WHICH SEAT ARE YOU ACTUALLY IN?

THE CEO GUIDE

Most owners hold three jobs and call it one title. **This guide names the five seats in a growing company, shows why one person cannot fill them all, and helps you decide, in writing, where you sit.**

---

15 minutes
Reading time

5 seats
Founder, Owner, CEO, COO, CRO

1 decision
Where you sit, and what you hand off first

IN THIS GUIDE

1 The five seats

2 Where each seat sits

3 Why you cannot wear every hat

4 Why the founder is almost never the COO

5 Deciding where you sit

6 Lead, Manage, Follow

7 The one-page decision

1 THE FIVE SEATS

A title is what you call yourself. A seat is the work the company needs done. They stop being the same thing somewhere around your fifth employee.

When you introduce yourself, you probably say "founder" or "owner." Both are true. Neither one describes what you did today.

What you did today was probably some of everything. You approved a payroll run, rewrote a proposal, talked a good employee out of quitting, chased a late invoice, and made a decision about next year's pricing somewhere between the second and third of those. That is not a job. It is five jobs, done in fragments, by one person.

Every company past its first handful of people has the same five seats, whether or not anyone is sitting in them. Start with the definitions, because the words get used loosely, and the looseness is where the trouble hides.

FOUNDER

A HISTORY

Answers: Why does this exist?

The founder started the company. They hold the original insight, the earliest relationships, and the story customers and staff still repeat. Early on, the founder does everything, because there is no one else.

Here is the thing most owners miss: **founder is not a seat.** It is a fact about your past, and a source of authority in the present. Nobody in the company reports to "the founder." You still have to choose a seat to sit in.

OWNER

CAPITAL

Answers: **What should this asset return, and when?**

The owner holds the equity. Their job is to decide what the business is for: income now, a sale in seven years, a legacy, a platform for something else. They set the return they expect, choose who runs the company, and hold that person accountable.

In a company with no board, the owner is the board. Most owners never hold a single meeting in this seat, which is why the business drifts toward whatever is loudest this week instead of toward an outcome.

CEO

DIRECTION

Answers: **Where are we going, and who is coming?**

The chief executive turns the owner's expectation into a strategy and a team. Strategy, cash, key hires, the two or three bets the year turns on, and the decisions no one else in the building is allowed to make. The CEO is the only person whose job is the whole company.

The CEO's real output is decisions and standards. Their real input is time to think, which is exactly what disappears when the same person is also running operations and closing deals.

COO

EXECUTION

Answers: **Does what we promised get delivered, the same way, every time?**

The chief operating officer runs the machine. Delivery, process, hiring plan, meeting cadence, the scorecard, the handoffs between departments. When something happens the same way twice, the COO built that. The COO's favorite word is "consistent." Their least favorite word is "exception."

A good COO makes the company run the same on the days the CEO is not in the room. That is the whole point of the seat.

CRO

REVENUE

Answers: Where is the next dollar coming from, and the one after that?

The chief revenue officer owns the number. Pipeline, pricing, the sales process, marketing that feeds it, and the people who carry a quota. The CRO thinks in quarters, in conversion rates, and in what has to be true today for the number to land in ninety days.

In most owner-run companies, the founder is the CRO by default, because the founder is the best salesperson. That works right up until it becomes the reason the company cannot grow past the founder's calendar.

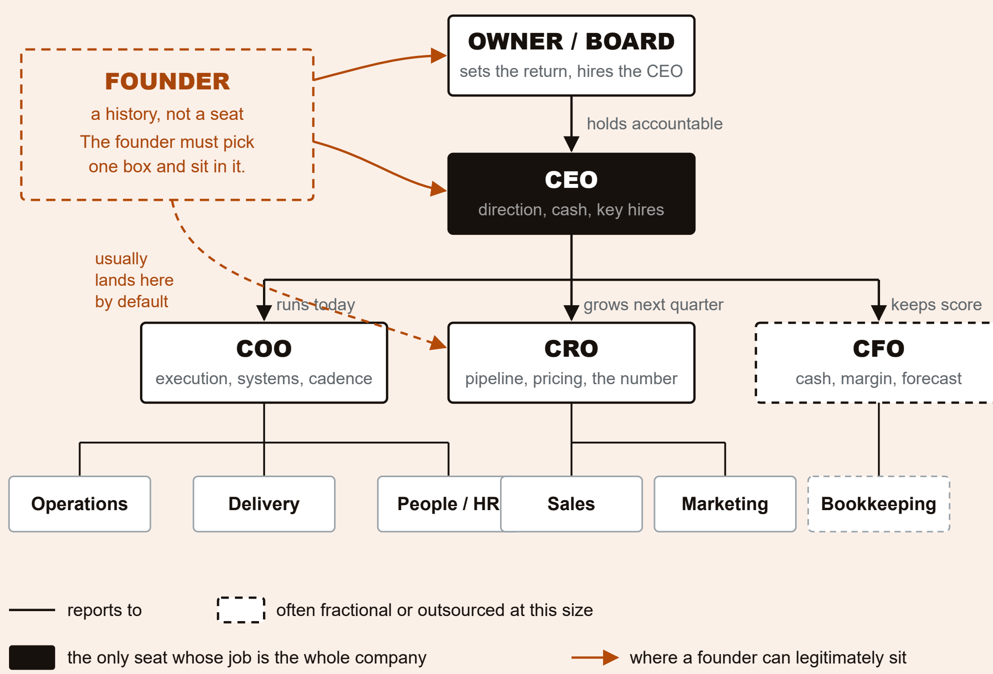
SEAT	ITS QUESTION	ITS OUTPUT	TIME HORIZON
FOUNDER	Why does this exist?	The story, the original insight	The past, and the next idea
OWNER	What should this return?	An expectation, and a CEO	3 to 10 years
CEO	Where are we going?	Strategy, standards, key hires	1 to 3 years
COO	Does it get delivered?	Systems, cadence, consistency	This week, this month
CRO	Where is the next dollar?	Pipeline and closed revenue	This quarter

The same five seats, reduced to the one thing that separates them: the question each one is paid to answer, and how far ahead it has to look.

2 WHERE EACH SEAT SITS

Draw the chart with the seats, not the names. Then find yourself on it.

Most owners have never drawn their org chart with themselves in only one box. Try it. The chart below is what a company of roughly ten to sixty people looks like when every seat is named, whether it is filled full-time, part-time, fractionally, or not at all.



The seats, not the names. The owner sits above the CEO and holds them accountable, even when they are the same human being. The founder is not a box: they choose to sit in the Owner seat, the CEO seat, or the CRO seat. Notice where they land when they do not choose.

Three things to notice.

The owner is above the CEO, even when it is the same person. The owner's job is to decide what the business is for and to hold the CEO to it. If you skip that, no one is asking the CEO the hard question, because the CEO is you, and you are busy.

The COO and CRO pull in different directions on purpose. One wants the machine to be predictable. The other wants to say yes to the deal that is not quite standard. That tension is healthy when two people hold it and the CEO referees. It is exhausting when it lives inside one skull.

The founder is not on the chart. The founder shows up as a dashed callout because "founder" describes how you got here, not what you do. If you do not deliberately choose a box, the business will choose for you, and it will usually choose the one where you are the best salesperson.

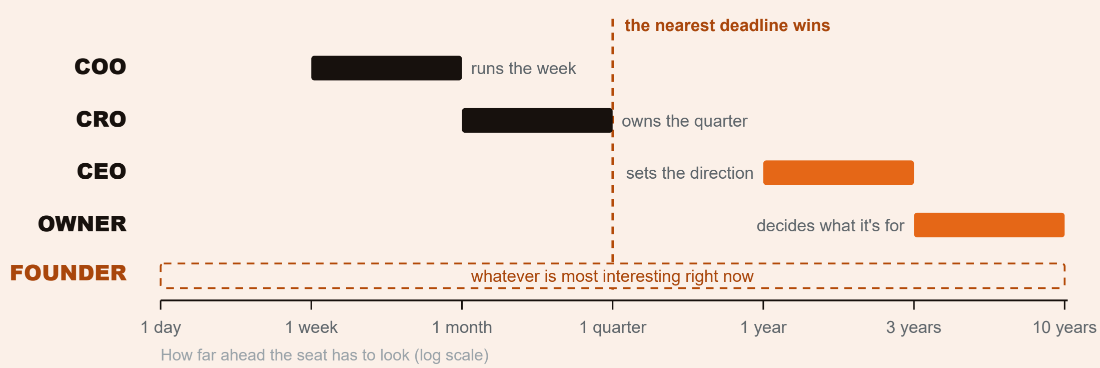
3 WHY YOU CANNOT WEAR EVERY HAT

Not "should not." Cannot. The seats conflict on time, on thinking, and on what counts as a good day.

Owners hear "you can't do it all" as a comment about stamina. It is not. Plenty of owners have the stamina. The problem is structural. The five seats are built to disagree with each other, and one person cannot argue with themselves and win.

The time horizons do not overlap

The CRO is paid to care about this quarter. The COO is paid to care about this week and the way things run. The CEO is paid to care about the next one to three years. The owner is supposed to care about a decade. When all four live in one calendar, the shortest horizon wins every time, because it is the one with a deadline. The quarter always beats the decade. That is why owners who are "too busy to plan" are telling the truth. They are busy being the CRO.



Four seats, four horizons, one calendar. Everything left of the dashed line has a deadline. Everything right of it does not. When one person holds all four, the left side eats the right side, and the company gets a CRO's quarter and no one's decade.

The seats think differently

Ask a COO and a CRO the same question and you get opposite answers, because they are supposed to. "A client wants a custom version of our standard package." The CRO hears revenue. The COO hears a process exception that will cost three people a week. The CEO's job is to hear both and decide. When one person holds all three seats, they do not weigh the arguments. They just go with whichever seat they were sitting in when the email arrived.

Founder thinking is different again. Founders are good at zero to one: the new offer, the new market, the deal nobody else could have closed. That is a real gift, and it is the opposite of the COO's gift, which is making the tenth time look like the second time.

Switching hats is not free

Every time you move from a sales call into a process problem into a strategy question, you pay a switching cost, and the work that suffers most is the work with no deadline: the thinking. A CEO who gets fifteen uninterrupted minutes a day to think is not doing the CEO's job. They are doing the COO's and CRO's jobs with a CEO title on the door.

What it costs, in revenue

Owners tend to count the cost of wearing every hat in stress and long hours. Count it in revenue instead, because that is the number that decides whether you can afford to fix it.

Start with the founder in the CRO seat, since that is where most owners are. You have a fixed number of selling hours in a week, and every one of them has a value: the deals you close, divided by the conversations it takes to close them. Every hour you spend approving invoices, refereeing a delivery problem or re-doing someone's work is a sales conversation you did not have. That conversation does not wait for you. It goes to a competitor, or it goes cold.

LINE	EXAMPLE	WHERE IT COMES FROM
DEAL	$15,000 average	your last twelve months of closed business
CLOSE RATE	1 in 3 conversations	so each conversation is worth about $5,000

LINE	EXAMPLE	WHERE IT COMES FROM
LOST HOURS	10 hours a week in the COO seat	the delivery fires, the hiring, the fixing
LOST CONVERSATIONS	2 a week	a conservative share of those hours
COST	about $500,000 a year	2 × $5,000 × 50 weeks

An illustration, not a benchmark. Put your own close rate, deal size and lost hours in and the multiplication does the rest. Most owners have never done it, and most are surprised.

That is only the direct cost, and it is the smallest one. The slower costs are bigger. A pipeline goes quiet for the month you spend inside an operations problem, and the deals that would have closed this quarter close next quarter, if they close at all. A delivery mistake you did not have time to catch turns into a client who does not renew. A pricing change you meant to make in January gets made in June, and every deal in between was sold at the old number. A hire you delayed by six months delays the revenue that hire would have produced by six months.

The founder who tries to hold the COO seat costs revenue a different way: through exceptions. Every custom deal, every "just this once," every process skipped because the founder said so takes margin out of a job and hours out of the team. Nobody sees it on a sales report. It shows up a year later as a company that grew its top line and not its profit.

Add those together and the question changes. It is no longer "can I afford to fill a seat?" It is "what is it costing me every month that I haven't?"

THE TELL

If you are wearing all the hats, the company has one of two symptoms, and usually both. Sales stall while you handle payroll, hiring and delivery. Or strategy waits while you close a deal. Either way, the thing that is not getting done is the thing only the CEO can do, because it is the only job with no one else's deadline attached to it.

4 WHY THE FOUNDER IS ALMOST NEVER THE COO

A founder can be a good owner, a good CEO, or a great CRO. The COO seat is the one they almost never fill well, and it is the one they most often try to.

This is the pairing owners get wrong most often, and it is worth understanding why, because the reasons are not about talent. They are about temperament, and temperament does not change because the org chart says it should.

Founders start. COOs finish.

A founder's whole history is starting things. That takes a tolerance for ambiguity, a willingness to act before the plan is complete, and a habit of changing the plan when a better idea shows up. Those are exactly the traits that make a COO's life impossible. The COO's job is to remove ambiguity, finish the plan, and then run it the same way for long enough that it becomes a system.

Put a founder in the COO seat and you get a predictable pattern. They build the process. They believe in the process. And then, in week six, a customer calls with a special request, or a better idea occurs to them in the shower, and they override the process themselves. The team learns that the system is real until the founder is in the room. That is worse than having no system, because now no one trusts the one you have.

Founders run on energy. COOs run on cadence.

Founders are at their best in bursts: the launch, the pitch, the rescue. A COO is at their best on a Tuesday in the middle of a quarter when nothing is on fire, running the same weekly meeting for the fortieth time and noticing that one number moved. Founders find that meeting boring. That is not a character flaw. It is a sign they are in the wrong seat.

Founders hold the "why." COOs hold the "how."

The founder carries the story: why the company exists, why the customers matter, why this is worth doing. A team needs that, and only the founder can give it. The COO carries the mechanics: who does what by when, what "done" looks like, what happens when it is not done. A team needs that too, and the founder is usually the last person who wants to be the one enforcing it, because enforcing it means telling people they like that they missed.

> **The founder is the reason the company is worth running. The COO is the reason it runs. Asking one person to be both is asking them to be the accelerator and the brakes.**

The exception, and why it is rare

Some founders genuinely are operators. They started the company because they were great at running the last one and saw a better way. If that is you, you will know, because you enjoy the Tuesday meeting and you get uncomfortable when a process is skipped. Even then, the company still needs someone else in the CRO seat and, eventually, a CEO who is not you. The point is not that founders are bad at everything. The point is that founders are always bad at being everything.

In practice, the first outside seat a founder-run company fills is almost always the COO, and the reason is exactly the one above. A COO gives the founder back the two things they are actually good at: selling and deciding.

5 DECIDING WHERE YOU SIT

You do not get to sit nowhere. You are already in a seat. The only question is whether you chose it.

Every owner reading this already occupies a seat. It is the one you drift back to when the day gets hard. For most, that is the CRO seat, because closing feels like progress. For some it is the COO seat, because fixing feels like control. Almost none drift toward the CEO seat, because thinking feels like not working.

Choosing is a three-part exercise. Do it honestly, in writing, and then tell someone.

1 · WHERE DOES YOUR ENERGY ACTUALLY GO?

Look at last week's calendar, not the one you wish you had. Sort every meeting and every block of real work into one of the five seats. Most owners find that sixty to eighty percent of their week lands in COO and CRO work, and the CEO seat gets the scraps. Whatever seat is getting the scraps is the seat no one is sitting in.

2 · WHICH SEAT DOES THE BUSINESS NEED MOST RIGHT NOW?

This depends on the phase you are in, and it changes. A company in the Perseverance phase, where revenue is real but fragile, usually needs someone in the CRO seat full-time more than anything else. A company reaching Viability, where it can survive a bad quarter, needs the COO seat filled before it can scale, because scaling multiplies every gap in the operating system. If you are not sure which phase you are in, the assessment on the Visionary Problems home page will tell you in a few minutes, and it changes the answer to this question.

3 · WHICH SEAT CAN ONLY YOU FILL?

Be strict about this. "Only I can do it" usually means "only I have ever done it." The honest list is short. Only you can hold the owner's expectation. Only you can carry the founder's story. Usually only you can close the handful of relationships that started the company. Everything else is a job description, and job descriptions can be filled.

Then decide, and decide the hand-off order

Pick one seat. Write it down with the date. Then decide which of the other seats you will hand off first. The rule of thumb:

- **If revenue is fine and delivery is chaos,** hand off the COO seat first. You keep selling and deciding. Someone else makes it run.
- **If delivery is fine and growth has stalled,** hand off the CRO seat first. This is harder for founders, because it means someone else talks to customers. It is also the only way the company grows past your calendar.
- **If both are on fire,** hand off the COO seat first anyway. A CRO cannot sell what the company cannot deliver, and a founder in the CRO seat is a known quantity while a founder in the COO seat is not.

"Hand off" does not have to mean a full-time executive hire. At most companies under about twenty million in revenue, the COO, CRO and CFO seats are filled fractionally, a few days a week, by someone who has held that seat before in a bigger company. The seat gets filled. The payroll does not double.

The founder as CEO is a phase, not a plan

One more thing to be honest about, because a lot of advice says the opposite. The founder holding the CEO seat works early. It stops working as the company gets large, and in Visionary Problems' experience it is not a good long-term strategy for a company that intends to be large.

The skills that build a company from nothing are starting, selling, improvising and saying yes. The skills that run a large one are allocating capital, building a bench of leaders, holding a strategy for three years without getting bored of it, and saying no. A few founders have both sets. Most do not, and the ones who insist on staying CEO anyway become the ceiling on the company: every significant decision waits for them, strong leaders leave because there is nowhere to go, and the business grows exactly as fast as one person's attention.

The long-term plan for a founder is to move up, not sideways. Up means the Owner seat, where you set the expectation and hold a CEO to it, and where the founder's story and relationships still carry weight without sitting on every decision. That hand-off is far easier if you have already handed off the COO and CRO seats, because by then you will have learned how to lead through someone else. Plan for it now, even if it is years away. The companies that manage the transition well are the ones that decided early that it was coming.

THE DECISION, IN ONE SENTENCE

"As of today I sit in the ______ seat. The first seat I am handing off is ______, to ______, by ______." Say it to your team. Once they hear it, they will stop bringing you the other seats' problems, which is the first day you will find out whether you meant it.

6 LEAD, MANAGE, FOLLOW

Choosing a seat is a decision about you. Filling the other seats is a decision about how you run people. This is how.

The moment you hand off a seat, you have a new problem: the work is now happening somewhere you cannot see. Owners who have never delegated a whole seat usually respond in one of two ways. They hover, which means they never really handed it off. Or they vanish, which means they find out about problems the same way the customer does. Neither is running a company.

Lead, Manage, Follow is the Visionary Problems shorthand for the three things a CEO owes every person in a seat below them. They happen in that order, every time, and skipping one is where hand-offs fail.

Lead: set the standard and say why

Leading is the part founders are naturally good at. It is the conversation where you explain what this seat exists to do, what "done well" looks like, and why it matters to the company and to the customer. The mistake is treating it as a one-time speech at the hire. It is a standard, and standards have to be repeated until the team can say them without you.

Manage: get a real commitment, not a nod

This is the part most owners skip, and it is the one the rest of this section is about. Managing is the moment after you have explained something, when you find out whether it landed. The lazy version is "Got it?" and a nod. The nod is worthless. People nod because they want the meeting to end, not because they understand.

The Visionary Problems version is a single question, and it changes everything about what happens next: **"What did you hear me say?"**

FROM THE VISIONARY PROBLEMS "LEAD, MANAGE, FOLLOW" VIDEO

"I'm taking responsibility for what I said and taking that off of their shoulders, so they don't have to worry about repeating everything back word for word. If I just say to somebody, 'Hey, repeat exactly what I said back to me,' they're probably not going to be able to do that. And to be honest, I probably can't do that either. I say things very quickly, and once the thought's in my head and it's gone, it's gone.

"By asking, 'What did you hear me say?' it allows them to put in context what they heard from me. If they don't get it right, I don't have to re-say the entire framework. I know, okay, this is where the breakdown in communication is. Now let me say it in a way that you understand.

"That's how I like getting a commitment. I don't want to just get a 'Yes, Jim, I've got it.' I want: 'Hey, what did you hear me say?' And I'm listening for the awareness. I'm listening for the standard of performance. I'm listening to hear if they understand their power to act."

Notice what the question does. "Repeat what I said" is a test, and the person being tested fails or passes. "What did you hear me say?" puts the responsibility for being understood back where it belongs, on the person who spoke. The answer you get is not a transcript. It is a map of what landed and what did not, and it tells you exactly which part to say again, differently. You do not have to re-run the whole conversation. You fix the one broken piece.

When they answer, you are listening for three specific things. If any one of them is missing, the commitment is not real yet.

1 **Awareness**

Do they understand the situation the way you do? Not the task, the context. Why this matters now, what happens if it slips, who is affected. Someone who can only repeat the task will do the task and miss the point.

2 **The standard of performance**

Do they know what "done well" looks like, in terms specific enough that you and they would agree on it without you in the room? "Handle the onboarding" is not a standard. "Every new client has a kickoff call within five business days and a written plan within ten" is.

---

3 Their power to act

Do they know what they are allowed to decide without coming back to you? This is the one owners forget, and it is the one that determines whether the hand-off holds. A person who does not know their authority will either escalate everything or nothing. Both come back to your desk.

GIVE THEM THE 1-3-1 RULE

The fastest way to make "power to act" real is a rule for what happens when they hit something they cannot decide alone. Dan Martell's version is the 1-3-1 rule: bring **one** problem, clearly defined; **three** options for solving it; and **one** recommendation, with the reason. You then say yes, or ask a question, and the decision is made in two minutes instead of a thirty-minute meeting where you do the thinking.

The rule matters because it separates delegating the work from delegating the thinking. An owner who only delegates the work is still the one solving every problem, which means they are still in the seat they thought they handed off. Say the rule out loud when you hand off a seat, and enforce it the first time someone brings you a problem with no options attached: send it back.

If you hear all three, you have a commitment. If you hear two, say the third one again in different words and ask the question again. It takes ninety seconds and saves the week you would otherwise spend finding out the hard way.

Follow: close the loop on the date you set

Before the first check-in, make sure the work actually transferred. The commitment tells you they understood it. It does not tell you they can do it. Alex Hormozi's three steps for that are simple and most owners skip two of them: **document** the process, in writing, so it exists outside your head; **demonstrate** it, doing it once while they watch; then have them **duplicate** it, doing it once while you watch. "What did you hear me say?" gets you the commitment. Watching them do it once is what tells you the seat is really filled.

Following is the discipline of coming back. When you got the commitment, a date was attached to it, or should have been. Following means the check-in happens on that date, whether or not there is a problem, and it happens in the same place every time: the weekly meeting, the scorecard, the one-on-one. Not in a hallway, not in a text at ten at night.

Following is not hovering. Hovering is checking in whenever you feel anxious. Following is checking in when you said you would. The difference is that the person in the seat can plan around one of them and not the other. It is also the COO's native discipline, which is one more reason to get someone in that seat: they will build the cadence that makes Follow automatic, so you do not have to remember to do it.

> **Lead tells them what good looks like. Manage finds out whether they heard it. Follow finds out whether it happened. Owners who do all three stop being the bottleneck. Owners who do only the first stay the bottleneck and call it culture.**

7 THE ONE-PAGE DECISION

Print this page. Fill it in with a pen. It should take ten minutes, and it should be a little uncomfortable.

Where I sit

Last week, my time went mostly to these seats (tick all that apply, then circle the biggest):

- ☐ **OWNER** deciding what the business is for, reviewing the CEO's results
- ☐ **CEO** strategy, cash, key hires, decisions nobody else can make
- ☐ **COO** delivery, process, fixing how things run, the weekly meeting
- ☐ **CRO** selling, proposals, pricing, the pipeline
- ☐ **FOUNDER** new ideas, new offers, the next thing

The seat no one is really sitting in right now is:

____

The seat only I can fill, and why (be strict):

____

____

As of today, I sit in the ____________ seat.

The first seat I am handing off is ____________, to ____________, by ____________.

The person I will say this to out loud, this week:

____

The next time I hand something off, the question I will ask instead of "Got it?":

____

The next time someone brings me a problem with no options attached, I will:

____

That last line is the whole guide in one sentence. If you take nothing else from these pages, take the question. Ask it this week. Listen for awareness, the standard, and their power to act. Ask for three options and a recommendation. Watch them do it once. Then come back on the date you set.

VISIONARY PROBLEMS

BUILD A COMPANY BEYOND YOU.

Visionary Problems is a community for founders, owners, and visionaries building companies that scale beyond them.

Join the community

Biweekly live calls, one hour. One problem, one solution, Q&A. Bring this worksheet.

SKOOL.COM/VISIONARYPROBLEMS

Book a discovery call

Thirty minutes with the Visionary Problems team. No cost, no script. Bring the worksheet.

CALENDLY.COM/D/CX9B-6GG-K2N

© 2026 Visionary Problems