A playbook by Saurav Kumar Nanda

Founding Product Hire

The First 90 Days

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Preface

There is a specific role in a startup that is harder than it looks from the outside: the founding product hire. You are not a VP of Product — there is no team to VP. You are not an IC PM — there is no PM org to join. You are the first person on the planet paid to think full-time about what the product should be, when everything is still forming.

I have been this person twice — once at Boomerangme, once at a Chicago stealth startup. I have also hired and coached this person three times as a founder. This playbook is what I hand to every founding product hire in the first week. Read it once, keep it open for 90 days, and you will know whether the role is working by day 91.

CHAPTER 01

Weeks 1-2 — Audit

You cannot change what you have not understood.

The worst thing a founding PM can do in week one is ship. The second worst thing is OKRs. What you do is listen. For 14 days, ask questions, write down answers, and resist every urge to propose. This is your audit window.

The four audits

1. People audit. 30-minute 1:1 with every person who touches product — eng, design, founder(s), sales, support. One question: "If you could change one thing about how product works here, what would it be?"
2. Product audit. Use the product as a first-time user. Write a friction log of every moment you paused, got confused, or wondered "why."
3. Metrics audit. List every dashboard. For each: what decision does it drive? If none, flag it.
4. Rituals audit. List every recurring meeting and artifact. Which are healthy, which are theater, which are missing?

What to write down

By end of week 2, produce a one-page audit memo with four sections — People, Product, Metrics, Rituals — and for each: three things that are working, three things that are broken, three things missing. Share it with the founder(s). Do not share it with the team yet.

> The audit memo is a forcing function. If you cannot write it in one page, you have not listened hard enough. Go do more 1:1s.

CHAPTER 02

Weeks 3-4 — Kill

Your first visible action should be removal, not addition.

The most counterintuitive move of week 3 is to stop things. Founders rarely kill projects themselves — they accumulate them. A founding PM's first superpower is the permission to delete. Use it wisely and quickly.

What to kill

- Meetings that have no decision attached
- Dashboards nobody opens
- Features with less than 3% usage that are in the main nav
- Roadmap items older than 90 days that have not started
- Slack channels with one-sided broadcasting

Announce the kills as a single list. Frame it as a gift of focus, not a critique of previous decisions. "To make room for what's ahead, we're sunsetting the following this week."

What not to kill

- Anything a paying customer depends on without warning
- Rituals that carry emotional weight but low productivity — migrate, do not delete
- Projects in flight that are 80% done
- Founder-beloved ideas unless you have a replacement in flight

CHAPTER 03

Weeks 5-8 — Ship

Ship something small, visible, and tied to the north-star.

Your first ship defines your reputation in the company forever. Pick a project with three properties: (a) small enough to ship in three weeks, (b) visible to every employee and every customer, (c) tied directly to the single metric the founders care about most.

What a good first ship looks like

- Activation onboarding v2 that lifts 7-day activation by 10+ points
- A pricing page rewrite that converts 2x better in a test
- An admin tool that saves ops 5 hours/week, freed for customer calls
- A landing flow that gets a buried feature to 30% of weekly actives

What a bad first ship looks like: a platform refactor, a design system, an analytics warehouse migration. These may be right — but not for your first month. They are invisible and will make you look slow.

CHAPTER 04

Weeks 9-12 — Measure

You ran the experiment. What did it teach you?

By week 9, your audit, your kills, and your first ship are all in the field. Week 9-12 is the first honest measurement pass. Three questions drive it.

1. Is the metric that should have moved moving? (If yes — why, with specifics. If no — why not, with specifics.)
2. What did the team learn about how we work? (Velocity changes, friction points, morale signals.)
3. What is the next 90-day focus? (Single metric, single theme, 3 bets.)

The 90-day review document

Write a three-page document, share it with the founders, then the team. Structure:

1. Audit recap (one page)
2. What we killed + what we shipped + what moved (one page)
3. Next 90-day bet (one page)

CHAPTER 05

Operating in the Open

Documentation is how trust scales beyond your desk.

The single highest-leverage habit you can install as founding PM is operating in the open. Everything important is written down. Every decision has a paper trail. Every meeting produces an artifact. This is not bureaucracy — it is the antidote to it.

The 4 artifacts

- One-page PRD per feature (see Chapter 2 of the 0→1 playbook)
- Decision log — a Notion page with every non-obvious decision, dated, with the rationale
- Weekly product memo — Monday morning, 200 words, shared with all-hands
- Quarterly theme doc — the one bet, the metric, the milestones

> A decision log saves you from re-arguing the same question every 60 days. It is the single document I missed most when I did not keep one.

CHAPTER 06

Working With the Founder

Your relationship with the founder is the job. Everything else is downstream of it.

A founding PM role is roughly 40% product work, 60% managing the founder relationship. That sounds cynical; it is not. The founder built the thing, sold it to the first customers, hired you, and carries emotional weight no one else can see. Your job is to make them more effective, not to replace their judgment.

The weekly founder 1:1

Set a recurring 60-min Friday 1:1 with the founder. Agenda, every week:

1. 15 min — what the founder is thinking about but has not said out loud
2. 15 min — what I shipped and saw this week
3. 15 min — what is stuck, and what we disagree on
4. 15 min — one strategic question neither of us has answered yet

Never skip this meeting. Cancel other meetings before this one. The single highest-leverage hour in your week is unstructured time with the founder on the hard problems.

Disagree productively

You will disagree. When you do, use this structure: "I hear [their view]. I think [your view]. The test that would decide between us is [falsifiable thing]. Do you want to run it or should I?" This structure forces the conversation into evidence, not opinion.

When to defer, when to push

- Defer on: brand voice, founder-customer relationships, early hires

- Push on: scope cuts, measurement rigor, PRD structure, meeting hygiene
- Negotiate on: roadmap priority, pricing, channel mix

> The founder hired you for judgment, not obedience. If you find yourself never disagreeing, you are not doing the job.

Chapter 6 checklist

- Weekly 60-min 1:1 in place, protected
- Three disagreements productively had in the first 90 days
- A shared doc of decisions where you disagreed and the outcome
- Founder feedback requested explicitly at day 30, 60, 90

CHAPTER 07

Hiring the Second Product Person

Do not hire until the system breaks. Then hire the opposite of you.

The most common founding-PM mistake after 6 months is hiring a product associate to lighten the load. The problem is that "lighten the load" is not a product strategy. You are better off under-resourced than adding a junior person to run a process that does not need running. Hire only when the system, not the calendar, breaks.

Triggers for the second hire

- There are 2+ active product areas, each with its own metric and cadence
- You have real designers (or design capacity) — a second product person can pair with them
- You are personally the bottleneck on more than 3 decisions per week
- Founder explicitly asks for more coverage during weekly 1:1

What profile to hire

The opposite of you. If you are a systems thinker who ships, hire a customer-facing product person who can live in the data. If you are a growth PM, hire a platform PM. The job is coverage, not cloning.

Onboarding the second PM

1. Week 1: audit — same exercise you did, but narrower scope
2. Week 2: shadow — sit in every one of your meetings
3. Week 3: clone — they run a meeting you used to run, you observe
4. Week 4: own — they take an area and you stop going to its meetings

Chapter 7 checklist

- Triggers written before the hire is approved
- Hire profile documented as opposite-of-founding-PM
- Onboarding plan covers 4 weeks from audit to ownership
- Weekly check-in during first 90 days of their tenure

CHAPTER 08

What Breaks in Month 6

The system works for 90-120 days. Then it bends. Here is how to see it coming.

The first 90 days are about installing the system. Months 4-6 are about living in it. Months 6+ are about evolving it before it calcifies. Things that felt crisp in month 3 will feel bureaucratic by month 6 if you do not refactor.

Symptoms the system is bending

- The Monday scorecard is read aloud but no decisions follow
- The decision log has not been updated in 4 weeks
- PRDs are growing past one page, quietly
- Team members are pre-negotiating outside the weekly meeting
- Founder is making decisions without looping you in

Five refactor moves

1. Rotate the Monday scorecard owner — let a different person run it for a month
2. Kill one meeting that felt critical three months ago and is now theater
3. Reaffirm the PRD template publicly; show an exemplar
4. Do a public decision-log audit — close 5 stale items
5. Request an explicit check from the founder: what is broken that I have not noticed?

> Every system ages. The job is not to prevent aging — it is to refactor faster than the team can calcify.

Chapter 8 checklist

- Month-6 refactor session on the calendar from month 3
- At least one meeting killed between month 3 and month 6
- Decision log audited quarterly
- PRD exemplar shared every 90 days

CHAPTER 09

From Founding PM to PM Leader

The transition nobody prepares you for — and the 5 habits that make it survivable.

The first 90 days are one job. Months 4-12 are a second job. Year 2 is a third. Many founding PMs do well in the first phase and then stumble in the second — the transition from "the PM who does everything" to "the PM who builds the function" is poorly understood, rarely taught, and usually learned the hard way.

The job change at month 4

By month 4 you will likely have hired at least one person (another PM, a designer, a researcher, or a data analyst). Your job shifts from producer to multiplier. The metric of your success changes from "what did I ship?" to "what did the team ship that they could not have without me?" This is a full identity shift.

Five habits for the transition

1. Weekly 1:1s with every direct report — 30 minutes, their agenda, not yours
2. Public disagreement — when your team sees you disagree with a founder in a healthy way, they learn it is safe
3. Public decision logs — every decision you made, written publicly, rationale included
4. Quarterly written review of each direct report — even if no HR process requires it
5. Permission structures — tell the team exactly what they do not need your sign-off for

What stops working

- Heroics — you cannot personally catch everything anymore

- Secret decisions — they erode trust faster than bad decisions
- Friday ship-it sessions — replace with team-led demos
- "I'll just do it" — every time you do, you atrophy a teammate

What starts working

- Written standards everyone can point to
- Rituals you did not invent being run well without you
- Team members making calls you would have made, differently, and succeeding
- Slack going quiet because decisions are happening in docs

> The move from founding PM to PM leader is the one transition I wish I had been coached on. It is 30% skill and 70% ego management.

Chapter 9 checklist

- Weekly 1:1 cadence with every report
- Quarterly written review per person, from month 6
- Public decision log, updated weekly
- Explicit permissions doc — what does not need your sign-off
- A meeting or artifact killed every month that you used to run personally

CHAPTER 10

Rituals That Outlast You

Systems are gifts to the version of the team that exists without you.

One day you will leave. Either you change roles, the company changes, or life changes. The measure of your time as founding PM is what still runs well 6 months after you stop touching it. That means designing for durability, not just for current effectiveness.

Durable vs. fragile rituals

Fragile (breaks without you)	Durable (outlasts you)
Monday memo written by you every week	Rotating memo owner, standard template
You running the weekly scorecard review	Scorecard read from a doc the team owns
PRD approval going only through you	PRD template with 2-reviewer rule
Decisions in your head	Decisions in a log anyone can read
Customer knowledge in your memory	Customer themes in a shared doc, updated weekly

The handoff test

Every quarter, pick one ritual you run and hand it to someone else for 4 weeks. Do not help. Watch what breaks. Fix the documentation, not the person. By the end of the year you will have stress-tested most of what you built.

Chapter 10 checklist

- Ritual inventory documented
- Each ritual has a named second in command
- Quarterly ritual-handoff exercise
- Retrospective after each handoff — what broke, what to document better

CHAPTER 11

A Day in the Life

What an effective founding PM's week actually looks like.

Founders and early PMs often ask "what should I be doing?" The honest answer is: it depends. But here is the shape of a typical week for me, when things are running well. Use it as a reference, not a prescription.

Monday

- 8:00-9:00 — write the weekly memo, send to all-hands
- 9:00-10:00 — team standup, scorecard read-aloud
- 10:00-12:00 — deep work: the hardest product problem of the week
- 13:00-15:00 — 1:1s with direct reports
- 15:00-16:00 — PRD review or design review
- 16:00-17:00 — customer call

Tuesday / Wednesday / Thursday

- Morning: deep work blocks, headphones on, no meetings
- Afternoon: cross-functional meetings — sales, support, eng review
- One customer call per day, minimum
- End of day: written note of what moved, what is stuck

Friday

- 9:00-10:00 — founder 1:1
- 10:00-11:00 — retro or demo
- 11:00-12:00 — self-review (the 3-question ritual)
- Afternoon: pattern-finding — read the week's support tickets, user interviews, metrics

- Close laptop by 5. The job requires sustainability.

> The best founding PMs I know protect deep-work blocks ferociously and say no to meetings that do not produce decisions. The worst are maximally available and never shipping.

CHAPTER 12

Closing

The job is not to produce product work. It is to produce product clarity.

Everything in this playbook is a scaffold around a simple truth: the founding product hire's real job is to make the team braver about what to build and more honest about what is working. The audit, the kills, the first ship, the measurement — they are all versions of the same thing. Clarity in, clarity out.

— Saurav Kumar Nanda · Chicago & Balasore · 2026