From Founder Knowledge to Organisational Systems: The Founder-to-System Translation Model for Scaling Expert-Led Online Education

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0009-0003-3671-6959

DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.101000834

Received: 22 October 2026; Accepted: 05 November 2026; Published: 20 November 2026

ABSTRACT

Many online education organisations are built around one expert. The founder's knowledge, methods and professional judgement are, in effect, part of what learners pay for. As long as teaching, assessment and key decisions keep running through that person, the organisation can grow only as far as the founder's time allows, and its quality depends on the founder's availability. Studies of tacit knowledge, codification, organisational routines, delegation and quality assurance each explain part of this problem, but they have not yet been brought together into an operational framework for expert-led online education, particularly where the founder stays actively involved. This conceptual paper asks how a founder's expertise can be turned into an organisational system that supports growth without lowering quality. I propose the Founder-to-System Translation Model (FSTM), which builds on Natseva's work on founder authority in online education and on established research on knowledge transfer, organisational routines and decision rights. The model describes six linked processes: articulation of founder knowledge, codification, operational translation, delegation, quality control and scalable delivery. For each one it sets out what is transferred, through which vehicle, to whom, what that person may decide alone, how quality is checked and when a matter goes back to the founder. Two ideas are central. Documented knowledge is not the same as usable organisational capability, and escalation to the founder is better read as a diagnostic signal than as a failure. The model is illustrated with contextual information from Happy Life Academy, where the author holds a role that is disclosed in the paper, and six research propositions are formulated. The FSTM has not been tested empirically, and the illustration should not be read as evidence for it.

Keywords: founder knowledge; tacit knowledge; codification; decision rights; online education

INTRODUCTION

In online education organisations built around an expert, the founder's expertise is often a large part of the product itself. Programmes, methods, certification criteria and even the tone of teaching tend to come from one person's knowledge and judgement. Many such organisations start as an extension of the founder's own teaching, and the founder's name is part of what attracts learners. Natseva (2026) describes this situation as a problem of founder authority. The organisation relies on the founder for intellectual control, brand identity and pedagogical consistency, and as it grows it has to decide how much of that authority can be shared.

Concentrated knowledge of this kind is an asset. It gives the organisation a coherent method, a standard people recognise and credibility in the eyes of learners. In the knowledge-based view of the firm, knowledge is the main foundation of organisational capability (Grant, 1996; Kogut & Zander, 1992). The difficulty is that much expert knowledge is tacit. Polanyi (1966) famously observed that people know more than they can say, and moving such knowledge around inside an organisation is hard even when everyone involved wants it to happen (Szulanski, 1996).

The same asset can turn into a bottleneck. If teaching, assessment, quality judgements and day-to-day decisions all keep passing through the founder, the organisation can do only as much as one person has time and attention for. Greiner (1972) argued that organisations growing through their founders' creativity eventually reach a crisis of leadership, and that the more directive growth that follows tends to produce a crisis of autonomy. Studies of founders also show that their relationship with the organisation shifts as it grows (Boeker & Karichalil, 2002; Wasserman, 2008).

Online delivery makes this tension sharper. Without the physical limits of a classroom, demand can outpace the organisation's ability to keep quality steady. Recorded content costs almost nothing to reproduce. Facilitation, feedback, assessment, supervision of practice and certification are a different matter, because each depends on judgement in a specific situation. When a programme certifies practitioners, the quality of those judgements matters well beyond the individual learner. And when the brand carries the founder's name, a mistake by delegated staff reflects on the founder as well. For organisations like these, the real question is not whether to delegate. It is how the founder's knowledge, decisions and standards can be turned into practices that other people can carry out consistently and well.

Several bodies of research deal with parts of this question. Work on knowledge creation explains how tacit and explicit knowledge interact (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009). Studies of codification look at what it costs to make knowledge explicit and where that effort stops paying off (Cowan et al., 2000), while work on knowledge strategy contrasts codification with personalisation (Hansen et al., 1999). Replication research asks how organisations copy a template that works (Winter & Szulanski, 2001). Routines theory separates the written or abstract form of a routine from the way it is actually performed (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Organisational economics looks at how decision rights are allocated and how problems find their way to the people able to solve them (Aghion & Tirole, 1997; Garicano, 2000). Each of these literatures is useful on its own terms. They have rarely been combined into an operational framework for expert-led online education, however, and even less often for organisations in which the founder is still closely involved.

The question this paper addresses is therefore: how does a founder's expert knowledge become an organisational system that supports growth while preserving quality?

To answer it, I develop an integrative framework that I call the Founder-to-System Translation Model (FSTM). It draws on two sources, and I try to make clear throughout which ideas come from where. From Natseva (2026) I take the view that scaling founder-led online education is a matter of keeping intellectual control, brand identity and pedagogical consistency. From the literatures listed above I take the concepts of tacit knowledge, codification, stickiness, the ostensive and performative sides of routines, formal and real authority, and knowledge-based routing of problems.

What the paper adds lies in how these pieces are combined and made specific. The FSTM breaks translation into six linked processes: articulation of founder knowledge, codification, operational translation, delegation, quality control and scalable delivery. They are connected by feedback rather than lined up in a fixed order. For each process the model states the object of transfer, the vehicle, the executor, the scope of independent decisions, the way quality is checked and the threshold for escalation. It also separates documented knowledge from usable organisational capability and calls the distance between them the translation gap. Escalation to the founder is treated as a diagnostic signal: a steady stream of routine escalations may point to a gap in documentation, training or authority, whereas complex and high-risk cases may rightly stay with the founder. Finally, the paper sets out research propositions that later studies can test.

This is a conceptual paper. It reports no empirical study, and it does not claim that the FSTM has been validated or that it produces growth or quality. Happy Life Academy appears only as a contextual illustration, and the "Organisational Illustration: Happy Life Academy" section explains my relationship with that organisation.

The "Theoretical background" section reviews the theoretical background and the "The Founder-to-System Translation Model" section presents the model. The "Organisational Illustration: Happy Life Academy" section gives the organisational illustration, and the "Research propositions" section states the research propositions. The "Discussion" section discusses what the model contributes, where it overlaps with existing

work and where it falls short. The "Practical implications" and "Limitations and future research" sections cover practical implications and limitations, and the "Conclusion" section concludes.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Tacit and Expert Knowledge

Most discussions of expert knowledge in organisations still start from Polanyi's (1966) distinction between what people know and what they can put into words. Experienced practitioners recognise patterns, weigh cues and adjust what they do in ways they can only partly explain. In education, this might mean sensing that a learner's difficulty is conceptual rather than motivational, knowing when to adapt an exercise, or seeing that a piece of work meets the standard even though it does not look the way it was expected to. Judgements like these are learned in practice and usually show up in action rather than as rules.

Later work treats the tacit–explicit distinction as a continuum rather than a strict divide (Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009), and this matters for my argument. If some parts of expert knowledge can be put into words with effort, while others can only be passed on through demonstration and supervised practice, then asking whether founder knowledge is tacit is the wrong question. The useful question is which parts of it are easier or harder to articulate, and what each part needs in order to be transferred.

The knowledge-based view puts this problem at the heart of organisation theory. For Grant (1996), the main task of the firm is to integrate specialised knowledge held by individuals. Kogut and Zander (1992) argued that organisations are better than markets at sharing and transferring what individuals and groups know, and that knowledge lives not only in people but also in the organising principles through which they work together. Applied to an expert-led organisation, this suggests that founder knowledge becomes organisational knowledge only when it is built into shared principles and practices. Giving other people access to the founder is not enough.

Codification and Knowledge Transfer

Nonaka (1994) saw organisational knowledge creation as an ongoing exchange between tacit and explicit knowledge, moving through socialisation, externalisation, combination and internalisation. What makes the model relevant here is that it places articulation and learning by doing in the same cycle. Knowledge that has been externalised still has to be internalised by whoever is going to use it.

Codification brings both gains and costs. Cowan, David and Foray (2000) argued that whether knowledge gets codified depends on costs and incentives, and not only on what kind of knowledge it is. Once codified, knowledge can be stored, sent and reused cheaply. Producing it, however, takes effort, and a code is useful only to people who share the understanding behind it. Hansen, Nohria and Tierney (1999) contrasted a codification strategy, in which knowledge is captured in documents and reused, with a personalisation strategy, in which it travels mainly through direct contact between people. One implication of their work is that organisations whose value rests on tailored expert judgement cannot depend on codification alone.

Transfer research helps explain why documentation does not guarantee use. Szulanski (1996) found that the main obstacles to transferring best practice inside firms had to do with knowledge rather than motivation: recipients lacked absorptive capacity, the causes behind a practice were unclear, and the relationship between source and recipient was difficult. Cohen and Levinthal (1990) defined absorptive capacity as the ability to recognise, take in and apply new knowledge, an ability that rests on related knowledge one already has. Zander and Kogut (1995) linked how codifiable and teachable a capability is to how quickly it is transferred. Read together, these studies suggest that a founder's written method can stay unusable if the people receiving it lack the background to interpret it, or if the reasoning behind its rules is not clear to them.

Founder Leadership and Founder Authority

In the entrepreneurship literature, the founder's ongoing role comes up again and again as a strategic issue. Greiner (1972) described growth as a series of phases, each ending in its own crisis. Growth through creativity ends in a crisis of leadership; the growth through direction that follows ends in a crisis of autonomy, which delegation resolves. Wasserman (2008) described the founder's dilemma as a choice between keeping control and capturing the value that comes from bringing other people in. Boeker and Karichalil (2002) found that founders are more likely to leave as firms grow, and that this also depends on their ownership and position.

Most of this work is about succession or exit. The situation I am interested in is different. In expert-led education organisations the founder often remains the main source of method and the public face of the brand while the organisation grows. The question, then, is not when the founder should be replaced, but how authority over method and quality can be shared while the founder is still active.

Natseva (2026) deals with exactly this situation in online education. She treats scaling as a matter of keeping intellectual control, brand identity and pedagogical consistency as the organisation grows, and she approaches founder authority as a question of governance. I start from this framing but do not reproduce her model. My question is narrower and more operational: what processes would be needed, within such a governance framework, to turn founder knowledge into organisational capability?

Organisational Routines

Nelson and Winter (1982) saw routines as the organisational equivalent of individual skills and as the place where organisational knowledge is stored. Feldman and Pentland (2003) later distinguished two aspects of a routine. The ostensive aspect is its abstract pattern, the structure people understand it to have. The performative aspect is what particular people actually do at particular times. Each shapes the other, and actual performances vary.

This distinction is at the centre of my argument. A written procedure, a course manual or an assessment rubric can shape the ostensive side of a routine, but none of them guarantees that the routine will be performed consistently. Pentland and Feldman (2008) pointed out that organisations often design artifacts in the hope of getting certain patterns of action, and that the two are not the same thing. Put in the terms of this paper, an organisation can document its founder's knowledge thoroughly and still be unable to put it into practice.

Research on replication arrives at a similar point. Winter and Szulanski (2001) argued that replication means transferring a wide range of knowledge, and that the centre plays an active part in developing and maintaining a working template. D'Adderio (2014) showed that transferring routines requires a balance between staying faithful to the template and adapting to local conditions. Expert-led education faces the same tension: staff need to deliver the founder's method faithfully, yet competent staff also have to adjust it for different learners.

Delegation and Decision Rights

Delegation is often thought of as handing out tasks. In organisational economics it is understood instead as the allocation of decision rights. Aghion and Tirole (1997) separated formal authority, the right to decide, from real authority, actual control over the decision. Real authority tends to sit with whoever has the relevant information. A subordinate with formal authority may still defer to a better-informed superior, and an overloaded principal may in practice leave real authority with subordinates without ever formally delegating it.

This applies directly to founder-led organisations. A team member may formally be in charge of a programme while every question that matters still goes to the founder, simply because the founder has the knowledge needed to decide. Delegation then exists on paper but not in practice.

Garicano (2000) modelled organisations as knowledge-based hierarchies. Workers deal with common or easier problems and pass unusual or harder ones up to specialists. This offers a useful way of thinking about

escalation. Passing a problem upward is not a failure in itself; it is efficient when problems are rare and call for scarce expertise. It becomes inefficient when ordinary problems are passed up only because the knowledge needed to solve them has not been made available where they arise.

Quality Control in Educational Delivery

Quality control in education depends heavily on human judgement in assessment and feedback. Bloxham, den Outer, Hudson and Price (2016) studied how experienced assessors used assessment criteria and found wide differences in which criteria they chose, how they ranked them and how they scored them. They concluded that assessment judgements are complex, intuitive and tacit enough that some variation cannot be avoided, although social processes for sharing standards can bring judgements closer together. Written criteria on their own, then, do not ensure consistent judgement.

For an organisation translating its founder's knowledge, this means quality control has two parts. The explicit part consists of stated standards, criteria and checklists. The social part consists of calibration, where assessors compare their judgements on the same examples, and moderation, where judgements are reviewed by others. Without the social part, even well-written standards may be applied unevenly.

Scalability in Educational Organisations

Scaling in education is not like scaling in manufacturing, because the core service involves interaction and judgement. Digital technology makes content cheaper to distribute, but it does not make expert feedback, supervision or assessment any cheaper. Growth in expert-led education therefore depends on whether the organisation can reproduce these judgement-heavy activities through people other than the founder. The replication literature suggests that this takes a template, a central unit that maintains it, and ways of spotting and correcting deviations (Winter & Szulanski, 2001).

Synthesis

The literature reviewed above supplies several building blocks. Tacit knowledge theory explains why founder expertise is hard to pass on, and codification research shows what documentation can and cannot do. Transfer research points to recipient capacity and causal ambiguity as barriers. Routines theory separates written patterns from what people actually do. Work on authority and knowledge hierarchies explains the difference between formal and real delegation and gives a rationale for escalation. Assessment research shows that consistent quality judgement needs social calibration as well as explicit criteria. Finally, work on founders and on founder authority in online education describes the organisational setting.

What these strands do not yet offer is a single operational framework for expert-led online education in which the founder remains active. The "The Founder-to-System Translation Model" section proposes one.

THE FOUNDER-TO-SYSTEM TRANSLATION MODEL

Definition and Core Distinction

I define the Founder-to-System Translation Model (FSTM) as a framework describing how a founder's knowledge, decisions and standards become organisational practices that other people can carry out, check and improve. The word translation is chosen on purpose. It suggests that content changes form as it passes from one carrier to another, and that some of its meaning may be lost or distorted along the way.

The model rests on one distinction: documented knowledge is not the same as usable organisational capability. Knowledge is documented when the founder's method, criteria and reasoning are written down in a form others can read. Capability is usable when people other than the founder can apply that knowledge to real cases, reach judgements that are true to the founder's method and meet explicit educational and professional standards, and recognise when a case falls outside their remit.

I call the distance between the two the translation gap. The idea follows from routines theory, which holds that written patterns do not guarantee performance (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Pentland & Feldman, 2008), and from transfer research, which shows that recipient capacity and causal ambiguity limit use (Szulanski, 1996).

The translation gap can take at least three forms. There is a knowledge gap when the relevant knowledge has not yet been articulated or recorded. There is a competence gap when it has been recorded but the people who need it cannot yet apply it reliably. And there is an authority gap when they can apply it but lack the formal or real authority to act on their own judgement (Aghion & Tirole, 1997). Each form needs a different remedy: further articulation, training and supervised practice, or a change in decision rights.

Six Interrelated Processes

The FSTM breaks translation into six processes: articulation of founder knowledge, codification, operational translation, delegation, quality control and scalable delivery. I present them in a logical order, but they do not have to happen one after another.

In practice they run side by side and move at different speeds in different parts of the organisation. One programme may already be in scalable delivery while a newer one is still being articulated, and quality control in one area may show that codification in another is incomplete. Feedback loops link the processes; they are described in the "Feedback between processes" subsection.

Each process is described along six dimensions:

- the object of transfer: what knowledge, decision or standard is being moved;
- the vehicle: the document, process or training through which it moves;
- the executor: who takes over the work;
- the scope of independent decisions: what the executor may decide without referral;
- the quality check: how the organisation verifies that the transfer works;
- the escalation threshold: the conditions under which a matter returns to the founder.

The model keeps two criteria of successful transfer apart. The first is fidelity, meaning how closely delegated practice reproduces the founder's method, including its distinctions and priorities. The second is quality, meaning how well practice meets explicit educational and professional standards, such as stated learning outcomes, assessment criteria and professional codes, which can be examined without reference to the founder. Agreement with the founder shows fidelity. On its own it does not show quality, since the founder's judgement can itself be measured against such standards. For this reason the model treats the founder's review as a check of fidelity and calls for a separate check against explicit standards wherever these exist or can be written.

Articulation of founder knowledge. What is transferred here is the founder's method: the criteria of good practice, the reasoning behind judgements the founder makes again and again, and the lines the founder draws between acceptable and unacceptable work. Because so much of this is tacit, it has to be drawn out through commentary on real cases, think-aloud review of learner work, recorded explanations and annotated examples. The work is usually done by a knowledge partner, such as an academic or training lead, together with the founder. The knowledge partner decides how material is structured and recorded, but not what the method is. Fidelity is checked through the founder's review and through a recognisability test, which asks whether someone reading the material would reach the same judgement as the founder on the same case. Quality is checked separately against explicit standards. Any question about the substance of the method stays with the founder.

Codification. At this stage the articulated knowledge is turned into stable, reusable forms: standards, procedures, assessment criteria, annotated exemplars, decision rules together with their rationale, and descriptions of boundary cases. These are carried by manuals, textbooks, methodological materials, rubrics and decision logs. An academic or curriculum team does the work and decides on wording, organisation and versioning. Quality is checked through the founder's sign-off and by giving the material to someone who did not help write it, which helps to reveal causal ambiguity (Szulanski, 1996). Uncertainty about what a rule means, or contradictions between documents, are escalated.

Operational translation. Here codified knowledge becomes workflow: who does what, when, and with which tools and templates. The vehicles are process descriptions, role descriptions, schedules, onboarding materials and a training programme for delivery staff. Since codified knowledge does not create competence by itself, this training should include observation, supervised practice and feedback, which corresponds to the internalisation phase in Nonaka (1994). An operations lead and a training lead share the work and decide on sequencing, scheduling and tools. Quality is checked through pilot runs and by making sure every step has an owner. Process changes that could affect learner outcomes or standards are escalated.

Delegation. What is transferred is the right to decide on defined classes of cases. The vehicle is an explicit statement of decision rights that says, for each class of decision, whether the executor decides, decides and informs, recommends, or refers. Staff are authorised once they have shown competence, not simply because they attended training. The executors are trainers, assessors and support staff, who decide on their own within the defined classes. Quality is checked by reviewing samples of their decisions. Cases outside the defined classes, as well as new or high-risk cases, are escalated. This process deals with the authority gap: if staff receive formal authority without the information they need to use it, real authority stays with the founder (Aghion & Tirole, 1997).

Quality control. The object here is the standard of delivery and assessment. It is maintained through explicit criteria, calibration sessions in which assessors compare their judgements on the same samples, moderation of a share of decisions, learner feedback and review of the escalation log. Calibration is part of the model because written criteria do not produce consistent judgement on their own (Bloxham et al., 2016). A quality lead or academic body is responsible and may ask for re-assessment, identify training needs and propose changes to documents. Quality control is itself monitored through indicators such as agreement between assessors and patterns in learner complaints and appeals. Systematic deviations, disagreements about the standard itself and matters that carry reputational risk are escalated.

Scalable delivery. The object is the capacity to run more cohorts, programmes or language versions at the agreed standard. This is done by reproducing a working template made up of the programme structure, trained staff, decision rights and the quality cycle (Winter & Szulanski, 2001). The delivery team carries it out and may make cohort-level adaptations within stated limits. Quality is checked by comparing indicators across cohorts. Adaptations that would alter the method, new programme launches and moves into new languages or markets are escalated.

Table 1 summarises the six processes across the six dimensions.

Process	Object of transfer	Vehicle	Executor	Independent decisions	Quality check	Escalation threshold
Articulation of founder knowledge	Method, criteria of good practice, reasoning behind recurring judgements	Case commentary, think-aloud review, recorded explanations,	Knowledge partner with the founder	Structure and form of recorded material	Founder review and recognisability test (fidelity); check against explicit	Any question about the content of the method

		annotated examples			standards (quality)	
Codification	Standards, procedures, criteria, exemplars, decision rules with rationale, boundary cases	Manuals, textbooks, methodological materials, rubrics, decision logs	Academic or curriculum team	Wording, organisation, versioning	Founder sign-off; test with a reader not involved in drafting	Ambiguous rules; conflicts between documents
Operational translation	Workflows: who does what, when, with which tools	Process and role descriptions, templates, schedules, training with supervised practice	Operations lead with training lead	Sequencing, scheduling, tools	Pilot runs; every step has an owner	Process changes affecting learner outcomes or standards
Delegation	Decision rights over defined classes of cases	Decision-rights statement (decide, decide and inform, recommend, refer); authorisation after demonstrated competence	Trainers, assessors, support staff	Decisions within defined classes	Review of samples of decisions	Cases outside defined classes; novel or high-risk cases
Quality control	Standard of delivery and assessment	Criteria, calibration on shared samples, moderation, learner feedback, escalation log review	Quality lead or academic body	Re-assessment requests; training needs; proposed revisions	Agreement between assessors; complaints and appeals	Systematic deviations; disputes about the standard; reputational risk
Scalable delivery	Capacity to deliver more cohorts, programmes or languages at the agreed standard	Reproduction of the template: structure, trained staff, decision rights, quality cycle	Delivery team	Cohort-level adaptations within stated limits	Comparison of indicators across cohorts	Changes to the method; new programmes; new languages or markets

Table 1. Processes of the Founder-to-System Translation Model

Escalation as a diagnostic signal

Escalation to the founder is built into the model; it is not a sign that the model has failed. Following Garicano (2000), sending rare and difficult problems to the person with the scarcest expertise can be efficient. Some matters belong with the founder for good reasons: questions about the substance of the method, new cases with no precedent, cases that carry high risk for learners or for the organisation's reputation, and decisions that set or change standards. Escalating these is both necessary and appropriate.

Even so, the pattern of escalation tells the organisation something. If routine cases of the same kind keep being escalated, one of the three translation gaps may be at work. The knowledge may be missing from the documentation, the people handling the case may not yet be able to apply it, or they may lack the authority to act. Recording each escalation with its type and outcome makes such patterns visible, and a category that keeps recurring becomes a reason to revise documentation, extend training or change decision rights. The goal is not zero escalation. It is that the matters reaching the founder are the ones that should.

Feedback between Processes

Three feedback loops connect the processes. Quality control feeds back into codification and operational translation, because inconsistent assessments or learner complaints can show that criteria are unclear or that training is too thin. The escalation log feeds back into articulation, codification and delegation: cases the founder resolves can become new exemplars and decision rules, and recurring escalations can lead to changes in decision rights. Scalable delivery, in turn, feeds back into articulation. New cohorts, languages and programmes produce cases that the current template does not cover; the founder resolves them first, and they then go through the cycle again.

These loops mean that translation is never really finished. The founder's knowledge keeps changing as new cases come along, so a codified method that is not updated will gradually drift away from what the founder actually does.

Boundary Conditions

I expect the model to work differently depending on four conditions. The first is how tacit the relevant knowledge is. Where judgement relies heavily on perception and interpersonal sensitivity, codification will capture less and supervised practice will matter more (Hansen et al., 1999). The second is how far the brand depends on the founder being personally present. If learners expect direct contact with the founder, some activities cannot be delegated without changing the product. The third is the maturity of the team, including its prior knowledge and absorptive capacity (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). The fourth is the regulatory and credentialing context, which determines which quality requirements come from outside and which the organisation sets for itself.

Organisational Illustration: Happy Life Academy

Status of this Section

This section illustrates the FSTM in context. It is not a case study: no interviews, observations, systematic coding or document analysis were carried out for this paper, so the section neither tests the model nor shows that it works. It describes a few organisational arrangements that I know of through my role in the organisation, which have not been independently verified, and shows how the vocabulary of the model can describe them. Hypothetical applications of the model are kept apart from these descriptions.

Disclosure of the Author's Relationship

I work at the Happy Life Institute for Direct Change Science, founded by Stoyana Natseva, and I am a member of the Academic Council of Happy Life Academy, which oversees academic standards and programme development. I also completed the Academy's DBA programme, which is led by its founder, Stoyana Natseva. Natseva's (2026) monograph on founder authority is part of the theoretical basis of this paper. The illustration is therefore written from inside the organisation by someone with a professional relationship with it and with its founder, and readers should treat it as an insider's account rather than an independent assessment.

Context

Happy Life Academy is an expert-led education organisation founded in 2019 by Stoyana Natseva. It offers programmes online and in other formats, including MBA programmes, a DBA programme, specialised

professional courses and shorter courses. Its certificates are issued as non-formal continuing professional education and are not state diplomas; the DBA programme is an additional professional qualification and does not confer an academic degree. The founder's methods and publications make up a central part of the Academy's educational content, which makes it an example of the setting described in the "Introduction" section.

Reported Arrangements

The arrangements below are current features of the organisation that I know of through my role in it. I describe them without saying when they were introduced, what came before them or what effects they have had, because this paper has not established any of that.

First, academic oversight rests with an Academic Council, of which I am a member. Its stated remit is academic standards and programme development. In terms of the FSTM, this body covers part of the quality control process and serves as the escalation route for questions about standards.

Second, teaching is shared between two main trainers, the founder and the director of training. The Academy holds 36 live community sessions a year; the founder leads one each month and the director of training leads two. Seen through the FSTM, this is a visible division of delivery between the founder and another trainer.

Third, programme content is recorded in written materials. The DBA modules come with lecture materials, module textbooks and separate methodological booklets that accompany the lectures and set out the assignments. In the model, these materials belong to the codification process.

Hypothetical Application of the Model

The questions below show how the FSTM could be applied to the Academy in future research. They are questions, not findings.

For the Academic Council, a study could look at which decisions the Council makes without the founder, which it refers to her, and whether these referrals follow the distinction between routine and non-routine escalation proposed in the "Escalation as a diagnostic signal" subsection.

For shared teaching, it could ask whether sessions led by the director of training follow the same explicit criteria as those led by the founder, and how consistency between the two is checked. For the written materials, it could test whether trainers and assessors other than the founder can apply them to real learner work as the founder would, which is the recognisability test described in the "Six interrelated processes" subsection.

Answering any of these questions would require data that this paper does not have, such as records of decisions and escalations, samples of assessed work, calibration results and the views of the people involved.

What the Illustration Does Not Show

The illustration does not show that the Academy follows the FSTM, that any of the arrangements described came about because of the model, or that they have improved growth or quality. Nor does it show how dependent the organisation was on its founder at any earlier stage. Because of my relationship with the organisation, the choice of arrangements may also reflect an insider's view. The "Limitations and future research" section returns to these limitations.

RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

The propositions below follow from the FSTM and the literature behind it. They are untested assumptions for future research, not findings, and each describes an expected association rather than a causal effect. For each one I give the theoretical rationale, possible measures and conditions under which the relationship might not hold.

Proposition 1. Codification combined with supervised practice is associated with greater usable organisational capability than codification alone.

Rationale. Knowledge conversion involves internalisation through practice as well as externalisation into documents (Nonaka, 1994). Transfer is limited by the recipient's absorptive capacity and by causal ambiguity (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Szulanski, 1996). Documents shape the abstract form of a routine, not how it is performed (Pentland & Feldman, 2008).

Possible measures. Fidelity could be measured as agreement between staff and founder judgements on the same set of real cases (the recognisability test). Quality could be measured through ratings of the same cases against explicit educational and professional standards by assessors other than the founder. Measures relevant to both include the share of cases in defined classes resolved without referral and the time between training and authorisation for independent work.

Limiting conditions. The relationship may be weaker where the knowledge involved is already largely explicit. The benefit also depends on recipients having enough prior knowledge to make good use of supervised practice. High fidelity would not indicate quality unless the practice also meets explicit standards.

Proposition 2. Explicit decision rights, combined with access to the information needed to exercise them, are associated with fewer routine escalations to the founder.

Rationale. Real authority depends on information as well as on formal rights (Aghion & Tirole, 1997). In knowledge-based hierarchies, common problems are solved where they arise when the necessary knowledge is available there (Garicano, 2000).

Possible measures. Numbers of escalations by type, classified as routine or non-routine using defined criteria; the share of decisions in defined classes made by staff; and the proportion of those decisions later changed by the founder.

Limiting conditions. The relationship may break down if the founder regularly overrides delegated decisions, if staff see deciding as personally risky, or if the brand depends on the founder being personally involved in the decisions concerned.

Proposition 3. Clear escalation thresholds, combined with shared assessment criteria and regular calibration, are associated with lower variation in delivery quality.

Rationale. Explicit criteria alone leave plenty of room for diverging judgements, whereas social processes for sharing standards can help bring them together (Bloxham et al., 2016). Clear thresholds send difficult cases to the people best able to resolve them instead of leaving them to individual discretion (Garicano, 2000).

Possible measures. Agreement between assessors on shared samples of learner work; differences in learner ratings across trainers and cohorts; rates of appeals and re-assessments.

Limiting conditions. Some variation in expert judgement may be impossible to remove (Bloxham et al., 2016). In small organisations, cohorts may also be too small to estimate variation reliably.

Proposition 4. The more tacit the knowledge involved in an activity, the weaker the association between codification and usable capability, and the stronger the association between supervised practice and usable capability.

Rationale. Tacit knowledge is hard to articulate (Polanyi, 1966). How codifiable and teachable a capability is affects how easily it can be transferred (Zander & Kogut, 1995). Organisations whose value rests on tailored expert judgement rely more on personalisation than on codification (Hansen et al., 1999).

Possible measures. Expert ratings of how codifiable each activity is, together with the capability measures proposed for Proposition 1, compared across activities.

Limiting conditions. It is hard to measure tacitness separately from the outcomes it is supposed to explain. The association may also depend on how good the supervision is.

Proposition 5. The more the organisation's brand depends on the founder's personal presence, the narrower the range of activities that are delegated.

Rationale. In founder-led online education, scaling involves keeping intellectual control and brand identity (Natseva, 2026). Founders have to weigh control against growth (Wasserman, 2008). Where learners expect contact with the founder, delegation may be seen as changing the product.

Possible measures. How important learners say contact with the founder is; the share of delivery time the founder provides; the number and kind of activities formally reserved for the founder.

Limiting conditions. The relationship may differ by type of programme and may weaken as learners get to know other trainers.

Proposition 6. Formal delegation without corresponding real authority is associated with persistent centralisation, and a later loss of real authority by the team is associated with re-centralisation.

Rationale. Formal authority does not give real control if the better-informed party keeps deciding in practice (Aghion & Tirole, 1997), and in founder-led organisations the founder is often the best-informed party on questions of method. By re-centralisation I mean that decisions the team had actually been making, and not merely holding on paper, return to the founder. Where real authority was never handed over, decisions that stay with the founder despite formal delegation are described as persistent centralisation.

Possible measures. How escalations develop after formal delegation; the share of delegated decisions changed by the founder over time; staff reports on whether they can act on their own judgement; and records of which decisions staff actually made before any return to the founder, which is what separates re-centralisation from persistent centralisation.

Limiting conditions. The relationship may run the other way when an overloaded founder leaves staff with more real authority than they were formally given (Aghion & Tirole, 1997). It may also be temporary in the early stages of delegation.

The propositions could be studied through longitudinal designs that follow one organisation over time, and through comparisons of expert-led education organisations of different sizes and at different stages of growth.

DISCUSSION

What the FSTM Adds

The FSTM does not offer a new theory of knowledge or of organisation. Its contribution is integrative and practical: it brings together concepts from several literatures and works out how they apply to one setting, expert-led online education in which the founder remains active.

Three things set it apart from the frameworks it draws on. First, every translation process is described along the same six dimensions. This makes it possible to ask of any activity whether the object of transfer is clear, whether a suitable vehicle exists, who carries it out, what they may decide, how quality is checked and when the matter goes back to the founder, so that a gap in any one of these becomes visible. Second, decision rights and escalation are treated as part of knowledge translation rather than as a separate management issue. In this setting, transferring knowledge without transferring decision rights leaves the founder as the person who

actually decides. Third, the model names the translation gap and divides it into knowledge, competence and authority gaps, each needing a different response.

The model also offers a different view of escalation. Much practical advice on founder dependence treats referral to the founder as something to get rid of. Building on Garicano (2000), the FSTM sees escalation as an efficient arrangement for rare, novel and high-risk cases, and as a warning sign when routine cases keep coming back. This helps an organisation tell apart escalations that reflect the founder's proper role from those that reveal an incomplete translation.

Overlaps with Established Models

The FSTM overlaps with several established models, and it is worth being clear about this. Its articulation and codification processes correspond closely to externalisation and combination in Nonaka's (1994) model, and its emphasis on supervised practice corresponds to internalisation. Combining documents with direct supervision reflects the distinction between codification and personalisation drawn by Hansen et al. (1999), although the model does not require either strategy to dominate. Scalable delivery draws on the replication literature, and in particular on the idea of a working template maintained by a central unit (Winter & Szulanski, 2001). The translation gap is, for this setting, a restatement of the distinction between the ostensive and performative aspects of routines (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). The treatment of delegation applies the distinction between formal and real authority (Aghion & Tirole, 1997). And Greiner's (1972) account of growth through delegation describes, for the organisation as a whole, a transition that the FSTM describes activity by activity.

The FSTM also builds on Natseva's (2026) account of founder authority in online education, which stresses the need to keep intellectual control, brand identity and pedagogical consistency while scaling. The FSTM does not replace that account. It suggests operational processes through which this control could be exercised by the organisation, and not only by the founder in person.

Any claim to novelty is therefore modest. It lies in how existing concepts are combined and specified for a particular setting, not in any single element.

Limits Of The Model

Several limits follow from the model's own logic.

The first has to do with knowledge that resists codification. Some of a founder's expertise may not be put into words even with careful elicitation (Polanyi, 1966). For this knowledge the FSTM relies on supervised practice, but supervision takes the founder's time, which is exactly the resource the model is trying to free up. The model cannot resolve this tension; it can only show which activities depend on it.

The second concerns teams that are not yet ready. Codified knowledge is usable only by people with enough prior knowledge to interpret it (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). If recruitment and training do not build that knowledge, documents will pile up while capability does not grow. The model labels this a competence gap, but it cannot provide the time and resources needed to close it.

The third is delegation that exists only on paper. Delegation may be announced and written into role descriptions and still not work. Staff may not have the information to decide, the founder may keep overriding them, or staff may prefer to pass decisions up to avoid personal risk. The delegation process therefore depends on the founder being willing to accept, within agreed limits, decisions that differ from the ones she or he would have made.

The fourth is loss of quality. Delegation can lower quality if staff are authorised before they have shown competence, or if quality control is weak. Codification can also make practice rigid: once a method is turned into fixed rules, it may lose the situational adjustments that made it work in the founder's hands. The replication literature describes a similar tension between fidelity to a template and local adaptation (D'Adderio, 2014).

The fifth is that founder knowledge itself changes. A founder's method keeps developing. Codified material that is not revised will drift away from current practice, and staff may end up applying an outdated version with full confidence. The feedback loops in the "Feedback between processes" subsection are meant to prevent this, but whether they do so is an empirical question.

Finally, the relationship between founder and team affects every process in the model. Szulanski (1996) identified a difficult relationship between source and recipient as a barrier to transfer. The FSTM deals with processes, documents and rights; it does not model trust, motivation or power, even though these are likely to influence whether the processes work.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The FSTM points to a number of practical steps for expert-led education organisations. These are reasoned suggestions drawn from the model and the literature, not practices with proven effects.

Identify critical dependencies. A good first step is to list the activities that currently require the founder and to classify each one. Some depend on the founder because of the substance of the method, some because of what the brand leads learners to expect, and some only because nobody else has been prepared or authorised to do them. Keeping a record, over a set period, of everything that reaches the founder and what kind of matter it is gives a practical starting point. The aim is to separate the activities that should stay with the founder from those that stay there only by default.

Describe standards with their reasons. Written standards are easier to use when they explain why a rule exists, include annotated examples of acceptable and unacceptable work and describe boundary cases. This reduces causal ambiguity (Szulanski, 1996). Before the material is adopted, it helps to give it to someone who did not write it and ask them to apply it to real cases.

Train through practice, not only through documents. Training for delivery staff can combine reading the written materials with observing the founder or an experienced trainer, supervised practice on real cases and feedback. Authorisation for independent work can then depend on demonstrated competence rather than on finishing a course. For example, staff might be asked to show agreement with experienced judgements on a set of sample cases, with their assessment of the same cases also checked against explicit standards.

Delegate decision rights explicitly. For each class of decision, the organisation can state whether staff decide, decide and inform, recommend, or refer. The founder then has to accept decisions made within these limits, including ones she or he would have made differently, and step in only on matters above the agreed threshold. If the founder keeps overriding delegated decisions, the underlying disagreement about the standard should be settled and written down instead of being argued over case by case.

Define escalation thresholds and review them. Thresholds can name the matters that always go back to the founder: questions about the method, new cases, high-risk cases and changes to standards. Everything else is dealt with where it arises. The escalation record can then be reviewed at regular intervals, and routine escalations that keep recurring become a reason to revise documents, extend training or adjust decision rights.

Calibrate assessors. Where staff assess learner work or certify practitioners, regular calibration sessions on shared samples can bring their judgements closer together (Bloxham et al., 2016). Moderating a share of decisions adds a further check. Calibration results also show which criteria people read differently and therefore need to be clarified.

Keep the feedback loops running. Codified material can be revised whenever quality control, escalations or new programmes expose gaps, with revisions approved by the founder or a designated academic body. Without regular revision, written methods are likely to drift away from what the founder currently does.

In the short term, all of this takes the founder's time. According to the model, that time goes mainly into articulation, supervision and calibration, after which the founder's role moves away from handling routine

cases and towards setting standards and dealing with exceptions. Whether this shift actually happens, and at what cost, is a question for empirical research.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The paper has four main limitations.

First, the FSTM has not been tested empirically. Its processes, dimensions and propositions come from existing literature and from reasoning about one particular organisational setting. Nothing in this paper shows that organisations following the model grow more, keep quality more stable or depend less on their founders than organisations that do not.

Second, the organisational illustration carries little weight as evidence. It describes a few current arrangements in a single organisation, with no data on how they came about, how they developed or what effects they have had. It is also written by a member of that organisation's Academic Council who completed a programme led by its founder, whose work informs the model. The illustration cannot be generalised and should not be taken as independent support for the model.

Third, the model is designed for expert-led online education in which the founder remains active. Whether it applies to other settings, such as professional service firms, clinical training organisations or larger educational institutions with established governance, has not been examined.

Fourth, several key concepts, including the translation gap, the routine or non-routine nature of an escalation and the tacitness of an activity, need operational definitions before they can be measured reliably.

Future research could take several directions. Longitudinal studies of single organisations could follow escalation records, delegated decision rights and quality indicators over time as translation processes are put in place. Comparative case studies of several expert-led education organisations, carried out by researchers independent of them, could test whether the proposed associations hold across contexts. Studies of assessor calibration could test Proposition 3 directly with shared samples of learner work. Measurement studies could develop and validate instruments for the recognisability test, for classifying escalations and for rating how codifiable activities are. Qualitative research, finally, could explore the relational conditions the model leaves out, such as trust between founder and team and the founder's readiness to accept decisions made by others.

CONCLUSION

Expert-led online education organisations rely on their founders' knowledge, and that reliance can hold back their growth. This paper asked how a founder's expertise can become an organisational system that supports growth while preserving quality.

My answer is the Founder-to-System Translation Model. Building on Natseva's work on founder authority in online education and on research on knowledge transfer, organisational routines and decision rights, the model describes six linked processes: articulation of founder knowledge, codification, operational translation, delegation, quality control and scalable delivery. For each, it specifies what is transferred, by what means, to whom, with what decision rights, under what quality check and with what escalation threshold.

The central distinction is between documented knowledge and usable organisational capability. An organisation can write down its founder's method and still be unable to carry it out without the founder. This translation gap may come from missing knowledge, insufficient competence or insufficient authority, and each calls for a different response. Escalation to the founder is appropriate for new, high-risk and standard-setting matters, and becomes a diagnostic signal when routine matters keep coming back.

The FSTM remains a conceptual proposal. It has not been validated, and the illustration from Happy Life Academy, written by an author whose relationship with the organisation has been disclosed, does not count

as evidence for it. The propositions in the "Research propositions" section are meant to let future empirical work test the model, revise it or reject it.

Declaration of Interests

The author works at the Happy Life Institute for Direct Change Science, founded by Stoyana Natseva. He is a member of the Academic Council of Happy Life Academy, the organisation used as an illustration in the "Organisational Illustration: Happy Life Academy" section, and completed the Academy's DBA programme, which is led by the Academy's founder, Stoyana Natseva. The paper draws on Natseva's (2026) monograph. No empirical data were collected for this paper.

Ethics Statement

This conceptual paper did not involve human participants, interviews, surveys, observations or the collection of personal data. Ethical approval was therefore not required.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article because no new empirical data were created or analysed. The article is a conceptual analysis based on the published literature listed in the References. The contextual information about Happy Life Academy in the "Organisational Illustration: Happy Life Academy" section reflects the author's knowledge of the organisation through his role in it; it was not collected as research data, and no interviews, surveys, observations or analyses of organisational documents were conducted.

Funding

This paper received no specific funding.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the revision of this manuscript, the author used Claude Opus 5.5 (Anthropic), a generative AI tool. The tool revised the language of the whole text: it rephrased sentences, removed repeated passages, condensed some sentences and changed parts of the text to the first person. It also drafted the Data Availability Statement and this declaration, added a missing DOI to one existing reference (Szulanski, 1996), numbered the reference list and formatted Table 1. The author takes full responsibility for the content of the article.

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