

Firefighting to Proactive Leadership for COOs Playbook



**A Framework For Responding to
Disruption Without Losing Direction**

Overview:

Here's what we'll cover in this playbook:



Introduction:

Most operations executives know the feeling: the day starts with a plan, and within minutes you're pulled into urgent issues, unexpected escalations, or problems no one else can solve. Firefighting becomes a way of working, and over time, a way of leading. While necessary in short bursts, it's unsustainable as a long-term operating rhythm. It drains decision-making capacity, limits team development, and keeps leaders focused on symptoms instead of progress.

Shifting from reactive to proactive leadership isn't about avoiding problems. It's about building systems, clarity, and habits that reduce unnecessary crises and protect time for higher-leverage work. For senior operations leaders, this transition is essential to scaling both themselves and the organization. This playbook helps you understand your reactive patterns, shift into proactive behaviors, and design systems that support calm, consistent execution.

Section 1: Understanding Your Firefighting Patterns

Uncover where reactive behavior shows up in your leadership and your team.

Reflection Questions:

Write brief notes for each:

- What types of issues pull you into firefighting most often?
- Which people or roles escalate directly to you instead of solving issues?
- Which recurring problems drain the most time or attention?
- When do you feel most reactive during the week?
- How much of your calendar is spent on proactive vs. reactive work?

Section 1: Understanding Your Firefighting Patterns

Uncover where reactive behavior shows up in your leadership and your team.

Self-Assessment Exercise

Check all that apply:

- I solve issues faster than others, so people wait for me.
- I feel pressure to respond instantly when problems arise.
- I often skip planning to make room for urgent issues.
- I fix problems myself instead of coaching the team through them.
- I regularly work at or beyond capacity.

Section 2: The Shift from Reactive to Proactive

Articulate the habits, systems, and thinking patterns that move you out of firefighting mode.

What Reactive Leadership Looks Like

Reflect on where you see these behaviors:

- Constant rushing
- Short term decision making
- Relief instead of clarity after each issue
- Dependence on “heroes” instead of systems
- Escalations without investigation
- Repeated issues with different symptoms

What Proactive Leadership Looks Like

Check the items you want to strengthen:

- Consistent planning cycles
- Clear expectations and definitions
- Predictable handoffs between teams
- Capacity that matches workload
- Processes that work without you present

Section 3: Building a Proactive Operating Rhythm

Redesign how your days and weeks function.

Weekly Rhythm Worksheet

Write your answer.

What time each week will you reserve for proactive leadership work?

What activities belong in that time?

- Planning
- Systems improvement
- Reviewing indicators
- Coaching
- Other: _____

Section 3: Building a Proactive Operating Rhythm

Redesign how your days and weeks function.

Create your “Proactive First” habits

Choose one commitment to implement:

- I will review priorities each morning before checking email.
- I will handle escalations in set windows instead of instantly.
- I will assign ownership to the right level before jumping in.
- I will ask clarifying questions before reacting.
- I will define success criteria upfront for all new work.

Write down the steps you will take to implement that commitment.

After you achieve success for your chosen proactive habit, pick another.

Section 3: Building a Proactive Operating Rhythm

Redesign how your days and weeks function.

Leadership Commitment

Select the commitments you want to adopt.:

- I will prioritize building over rescuing.
- I will model calm, structured problem solving.
- I will invest time in root cause work.
- I will design systems that scale beyond me.
- I will reduce dependence on heroic effort.
- I will create predictable rhythms for my team.

Section 4: Strengthening Your Team's Proactive Muscle

Your shift to proactive leadership only sticks when your team shifts with you.

If your team continues to escalate, wait, or rely on you to interpret and decide, you'll stay reactive regardless of your personal discipline. Moving out of firefighting also requires building ownership, clarity, and independent problem-solving into the team itself. When they investigate, recommend, and own outcomes, you regain the capacity to lead at the right level.

Team Diagnostic

Check any statements that apply.

- The team often waits for direction before taking action.
- Work is unevenly distributed among a few high performers.
- Processes rely on individual knowledge rather than documentation.
- Most escalations lack context or recommendations.
- People assume speed is more important than clarity.

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Moving the Team from Reactive to Proactive

You don't need a full overhaul. Start by changing expectations and reinforcing behaviors consistently.

1. Shift Escalation Standards

Before bringing you an issue, team members should answer:

- What is the root cause?
- What options have been considered?
- What do you recommend?

Make "recommendation required" the norm, not the exception.

2. Clarify Decision Ownership

Document:

- What decisions belong at each level
- What requires consultation
- What requires escalation

Ambiguity creates unnecessary upward movement.

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Moving the Team from Reactive to Proactive

3. Normalize Investigation Before Action

- Encourage teams to pause and gather context before responding.
- Choose clarity over speed to prevent duplication.

4. Distribute Responsibility

Watch for hero patterns. If the same people always fix issues, build redundancy:

- Cross-train
- Rotate ownership
- Document processes

5. Coach, Don't Rescue

When someone escalates quickly, respond with questions before answers:

- What do you think is happening?
- What would you try first?
- What outcome are we solving for?

Each conversation either builds dependence or builds capability.

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Team Commitment

Choose one behavior to reinforce with your team this month:

- We will escalate with recommendations, not just problems.
- We will define ownership clearly before starting new work.
- We will review recurring issues to eliminate root causes.
- We will prioritize clarity over speed.
- We will document processes that currently live in people's heads.

After reinforcement for one behavior is normalized, choose another.

Conclusion: Why This Matters To COOs

Firefighting will always exist in operations. The question is not whether issues arise, it's whether they define how you lead. For COOs, staying reactive slowly narrows your field of vision. You spend more time solving today's disruptions and less time shaping tomorrow's performance. The shift to proactive leadership isn't about doing less; it's about operating at the altitude your role requires – designing systems, clarifying expectations, and building capacity so execution becomes steadier and less dependent on you.

This matters because the organization calibrates to your behavior. If you lead in urgency, the system stays urgent. If you lead with structure, rhythm, and clarity, the system stabilizes. Proactive leadership expands your influence beyond problem-solving and into long-term value creation. It protects your judgment, your team's growth, and the organization's ability to scale without chaos.