

## **Strengthening Co-Founder Partnerships: Applying Couple Therapy Principles to STEM Ventures**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Co-founder relationships are critical to entrepreneurial success, yet they often suffer from conflict and misalignment that threaten business outcomes. In this research, I integrate insights from attachment theory, couple therapy principles, and organizational psychology to explore the dynamics of co-founder partnerships and identify strategies for fostering resilience and collaboration. Evidence-based interventions, such as goal alignment, communication training, and proactive conflict resolution, are presented as practical tools to enhance partnership effectiveness. By cultivating self-awareness, clarifying shared objectives, and promoting open dialogue, co-founders can mitigate risks of dysfunction and strengthen their relational foundation. The main contribution to knowledge of this research is the novel integration of couple therapy principles within the dynamics of co-founder relationships. This research contributes to the growing literature on entrepreneurial relationships by offering a framework for understanding and optimizing co-founder dynamics, emphasizing their pivotal role in sustaining innovation and long-term organizational success.*

**Keywords:** Co-founder; collaborative leadership; consulting; couple therapy; entrepreneurial failure; entrepreneurship; STEM entrepreneurship

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The entrepreneurial journey often hinges on a shared vision, typically established by co-founders—partners who collaborate to transform their innovative ideas into a viable venture. Co-founders share not only the responsibilities and challenges of managing a start-up but also form a unique

relational bond that can influence the stability and growth of their organization critically. Research has shown that the dynamics of co-founder relationships directly impact decision-making, resource allocation, and overall strategic direction, which are essential to achieving organizational objectives (Collins & Reutzel, 2022). Strong interpersonal connections between co-founders enhance trust and collaboration, fostering an environment conducive to innovation and resilience in the face of adversity (Klotz et al., 2014; Francis & Sandberg, 2021).

Within STEM-based entrepreneurial ventures, co-founder relationships play a critical role in driving innovation, particularly in university-affiliated incubators, research-driven startups, and technology transfer initiatives. Many STEM graduates enter entrepreneurial ecosystems where they must navigate both technical and interpersonal challenges. However, existing STEM education programs often emphasize technical competencies while overlooking the importance of relational and leadership skills necessary for successful co-founder collaborations. Integrating interpersonal training, including conflict resolution and communication strategies derived from couple therapy, could enhance STEM entrepreneurship curricula and better prepare students for the realities of team-based innovation.

However, the entrepreneurial path is fraught with challenges (Overall, 2016; Overall, 2020), and relational dynamics can often be a source of significant strain. Start-ups, inherently high-pressure environments, demand constant adaptability, resourcefulness, and alignment between co-founders (Wasserman, 2012). When misalignment occurs, it can lead to conflict, communication breakdowns, and eventual dissolution of the partnership. Empirical evidence from the extant literature suggests that relational challenges are a primary contributor to start-up failures, with conflicts between co-founders accounting for as much as 65% of failures in high-potential ventures (Wasserman, 2012). These findings underscore the critical importance of understanding and addressing co-founder relational dynamics to enhance start-up success rates.

The analogy between co-founder relationships and marital partnerships has been drawn in the literature, given the intensity and interdependence inherent in both types of relationships (Breshears & Cooper, 2018). Co-founders, like married couples, enter a legal and fiduciary relationship where mutual commitment is essential for success. Unlike marital couples, however, co-founders often lack access to structured interventions designed to address relational discord, such as couple therapy. Research indicates that relational interventions in professional contexts, including executive coaching and team-building exercises, often fail to address the deeper emotional and interpersonal issues that underpin co-founder conflicts (Gino & Staats, 2019). This lack of targeted support leaves co-founders ill-equipped to navigate challenges, increasing the likelihood of business dissolution.

Psychotherapeutic tools, particularly those derived from couple therapy and adult attachment theory, present a promising avenue for addressing relational challenges in entrepreneurial contexts. Couple therapy has been demonstrated to improve communication, resolve conflicts, and foster emotional security in intimate relationships, which parallels many of the challenges faced by co-founders (Johnson, 2019; Siegel & Hartzell, 2020). While there is a growing body of research on the application of psychology to organizational settings, the integration of couple therapy frameworks into entrepreneurial relationships remains underexplored (Hill & Weiner, 2022). This gap represents a critical opportunity to extend existing research by examining how psychotherapeutic interventions can be adapted to co-founder dynamics.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the application of couple therapy tools and adult attachment theory to co-founder relationships. Specifically, it investigates how these approaches can be used to foster secure relational bonds, improve communication, and enhance collaboration among co-founders. By integrating these frameworks into entrepreneurial practice, this research aims to provide actionable insights that support the long-term resilience and sustainability of start-ups. The theoretical foundation of couple therapy in entrepreneurship and organizational settings contributes to the broader entrepreneurship literature by highlighting the intersection of relational dynamics and organizational performance and offering practical implications for co-founder partnerships.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Systems theory

The integration of psychotherapy into business relationships is grounded in systems theory, interpersonal process theory, and adult attachment theory. Systems theory, introduced by von Bertalanffy (1968), provides a foundational lens for examining the interconnected relationships within organizations. This framework posits those systems—whether biological, social, or organizational—are composed of interdependent parts that function together to achieve shared goals. When applied to entrepreneurial ecosystems, systems theory highlights the dynamic interplay between co-founders, their teams, external stakeholders, and the broader market environment.

In entrepreneurial ventures, co-founders operate as the central nodes in a web of relationships that influence and are influenced by their actions. These relational interdependencies are often shaped by shared goals, complementary skill sets, and mutual accountability. However, disruptions within the co-founder relationship can reverberate across the organization, creating ripple effects that undermine team cohesion, employee morale, and stakeholder trust (DeRue et al., 2011). Systems

theory underscores the importance of identifying and addressing these disruptions early to maintain organizational equilibrium.

### **Interpersonal Process Theory and Relational Dynamics**

Interpersonal process theory, rooted in psychoanalytic and relational traditions, delves into the micro-level dynamics that shape interactions between individuals. This theory emphasizes the bidirectional nature of relationships, where the behaviors, emotions, and perceptions of one individual influence and are influenced by those of the other (Benjamin, 1996). In entrepreneurial partnerships, these dynamics are amplified by the high-stress, high-stakes environment in which co-founders operate.

One of the central tenets of interpersonal process theory is the role of emotional regulation in maintaining healthy relationships. Co-founders often face intense pressures, ranging from securing funding to scaling operations, which can trigger emotional dysregulation and exacerbate conflicts. Studies suggest that co-founders who engage in relational interventions that enhance emotional awareness and regulation are better equipped to navigate these challenges constructively (Graebner et al., 2020). Techniques such as active listening, empathetic validation, and non-defensive communication have been shown to reduce conflict and strengthen relational bonds.

Interpersonal process theory also sheds light on the power dynamics that often arise in co-founder relationships. Differences in expertise, financial contributions, or decision-making authority can create imbalances that undermine trust and collaboration. Research highlights the importance of addressing these power dynamics through transparent communication and equitable role distribution to foster a sense of mutual respect and partnership (Hogg et al., 2005).

### **Psychology of relationships - Adult attachment theory**

Building upon Bowlby (1988) and Ainsworth (1978), adult attachment theory posits that individuals develop internal working models of attachment based on their early caregiving experiences. In the first years of life, children form their attachment style (Levine & Heller, 2012) - their emotional bonds and relationships - to caregivers who provide for them. At the core of attachment theory is the need to feel safe and secure. Children, and especially infants, are vulnerable and their survival is fully dependent on caregivers. If children perceive that their caregivers can meet their needs, they will form a secure attachment. However, if the child perceives that the adults are unable to provide them with everything that they need, they will form an attachment disorder. If unchanged through inner reflection, self-awareness, or cognitive development, the attachment that is developed in childhood remains throughout adulthood. Attachment theory identifies several attachment styles—secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant, fearful-

avoidant, and disorganized—that influence how individuals approach relationships.

### **Secure Attachment**

In the middle of the spectrum is the secure attachment style. These folks trust others easily and can commit in relationships. They communicate their needs. They are cooperative and flexible in relationships. Individuals with secure attachment exhibit trust, effective communication, and a willingness to collaborate. In co-founder relationships, these qualities contribute to resilience, adaptability, and a focus on shared goals (Hudson et al., 2014).

### **Anxious-Preoccupied Attachment**

Those with anxious attachments are overly committed in relationships, and often, out-of-fear of abandonment, will have difficulty communicating their needs. They will avoid having difficult conversations that are oriented toward having their needs met. They can become overly focused on keeping the peace. Overtime, they can build resentment and passive aggressiveness for not communicating their needs (Levine & Heller, 2012). Co-founders with this attachment style may exhibit hypervigilance to perceived threats, excessive dependency on validation, and difficulty managing conflict. These tendencies can lead to heightened stress and impaired decision-making (Smith et al., 2019).

### **Dismissive-Avoidant Attachment**

Avoidants are suspicious of relationships, prefer the flexibility of open relationships, find it challenging to commit, and when their independence is threatened, they withdraw. Although it might not seem readily apparent for the avoidant attachment style, at the most basic level, Dr. Stan Tatkin, a psychologist and relationship expert, suggests that they often possess a fear of abandonment in the form of a fear of rejection. Avoidants will reject to avoid rejection. This is why the avoidant experiences issues with trust – they do not want to let anyone too close – as they do not want to be hurt. For the anxious attachment, it is far more in the forefront – for them it is a fear of abandonment and being alone. Comparable to anxious attachment styles, they can also be prone to cutting off communication completely without fully expressing themselves (Levine & Heller, 2012). Avoidantly attached individuals often prioritize independence, resist emotional closeness, and struggle with collaboration. These behaviors can foster misalignment and mistrust within the partnership (Schirmer & Lopez, 2021).

## **Fearful-Avoidant & Disorganized Attachment**

Marked by conflicting desires for connection and avoidance, the fearful-avoidant style is associated with relational instability and difficulty managing complex interpersonal dynamics (Fraley et al., 2011). The disorganized attachment style presents combinations of avoidant and anxious tendencies. They can even experience instances of the secure attachment.

In a romantic relationship, depending on where one falls on the attachment spectrum, they tend to attract a counterpart that is mirrored on the opposite side of the spectrum. For example, if one is slightly in the anxious territory of the secure center-point, they will be attracted to an avoidant person that is equally that distance away from the center-point. Conversely, if one is far toward the anxious end of the spectrum, they will be attracted to a mate that is far toward the avoidant end of the continuum. According to attachment theory, this attraction is due to individuals having a subconscious desire to work through their challenges rooted in childhood to become more secure (Levine & Heller, 2012).

## **Understanding Co-Founder Dynamics through Adult Attachment Theory**

Adult attachment theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the dynamics of co-founder relationships (Main & Solomon, 1990). Securely attached co-founders tend to trust each other, communicate openly, and collaborate effectively, fostering a positive and resilient partnership. Conversely, co-founders with anxious or avoidant attachment styles may struggle with trust issues, communication barriers, and conflict avoidance, leading to heightened tension and dysfunction within the business partnership (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Those with anxious attachment styles tend to be insecure, possess lower self-confidence, and are fearful of criticism and negative feedback. To avoid the discomfort that these experiences present, they feel the need to seek approval from their peers. They also conform to the interests of a group. Ultimately, they experience challenges in communicating their wants. By not communicating effectively, they often experience higher instances of resentment, passive aggressiveness, and burnout. On the contrary, the avoidant attachment styles tend to keep to themselves. They prefer not to socialize with colleagues. They can be perceived as distant or cold. They perceive others as untrustworthy and, in terms of group activities, they view these cynically. They avoid forming bonds with colleagues. They can be perceived as rebellious and critical of leadership.

Entrepreneurial settings often exacerbate attachment tendencies due to the high levels of uncertainty, pressure, and risk involved. For example, an anxiously attached co-founder may become overly reliant on their partner for reassurance, leading to dependency or burnout. Conversely, an avoidantly attached co-founder may withdraw from collaborative decision-making, creating communication gaps

and relational strain (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Understanding these dynamics is critical for developing interventions that address the root causes of relational challenges.

## **THE ROLE OF COUPLE THERAPY**

The aim of therapy is to help people navigate challenges through a neutral, third-party with expertise on relationships and the functioning of the conceptual mind. The environment of therapy is neutral, safe, and supportive that enables individuals to talk through their vulnerabilities. Through therapy, individuals develop self-awareness. They develop a greater understanding of the root causes of reoccurring patterns of behaviour that might be contributing to relational challenges. This deeper insight can help improve mental wellbeing.

Couple therapy is an extension of individual therapy by adding one's counterpart to the environment. It is used to improve relationships by helping both parties learn about themselves, their patterns, and how these dynamics show up in their relationships. It is used to build healthy, strong, and long-lasting relationships. Couple therapy offers a unique platform for addressing attachment-related challenges and fostering healthier dynamics within co-founder relationships. By providing a safe and supportive environment for exploration and intervention, therapy sessions enable co-founders to identify maladaptive attachment patterns, challenge unhealthy patterns, cultivate greater self-awareness, and develop more secure relational bonds (Diamond, 2001).

Johnson and Greenberg (2020) highlight the efficacy of couple therapy techniques, such as emotionally focused therapy (EFT), in promoting attachment security and relational satisfaction among co-founders. Grounded in attachment theory, EFT utilizes guided exercises and experiential interventions to facilitate emotional attunement, responsiveness, and vulnerability. For example, in a business partnership, EFT may help partners explore underlying emotions driving certain behaviors, such as a fear of being left out or concerns about trust and collaboration. Couple therapy can help co-founders build empathy, leading them to understand the perspective of their counterpart and the challenges that they experience. It can help them improve their communication skills by providing them with the tools needed to vocalize their issues in a safe environment, effectively, either in the presence of a therapist or on their own. In this way, it can help both parties with developing important skills in managing conflict when it arises.

The principles and practices of couple therapy are applicable in entrepreneurial contexts, where co-founders often share intense emotional, financial, and creative investments. These dynamics mirror the complexities of intimate relationships and necessitate strategies to manage conflicts, build trust, and foster effective communication. This therapeutic space allows co-founders to

understand recurring patterns of behavior, identify underlying sources of relational tension, and build resilience to navigate interpersonal and professional challenges (Diamond, 2001). Through such interventions, individuals can improve not only their interpersonal dynamics but also their mental well-being, creating a healthier foundation for collaborative success.

Couple therapy interventions informed by attachment theory can help co-founders recognize and address underlying insecurities and fears that may be contributing to relational distress. By exploring the impact of early attachment experiences on current relationship dynamics, therapy sessions empower co-founders to challenge negative beliefs, repair relational ruptures, and co-create a more supportive and nurturing work environment (Simpson et al., 1992).

Couple therapy equips co-founders with practical tools to navigate interpersonal challenges. These include strategies for active listening, nonviolent communication, and collaborative problem-solving. Research by Gottman and Silver (1999) underscores the importance of ‘repair attempts’—efforts to deescalate conflicts and restore harmony. When applied in entrepreneurial settings, such practices can help co-founders manage high-stakes disagreements constructively, reducing the risk of emotional disengagement or power struggles. Moreover, couple therapy emphasizes the development of empathy and perspective-taking. By fostering an understanding of each other’s emotional experiences and stressors, co-founders can build a foundation of mutual respect and trust. These relational strengths are critical for managing the uncertainties and pressures of entrepreneurship, which often test the resilience of professional partnerships.

Although couple therapy in co-founder relationships is a new field of inquiry, studies have shown that comparable interventions such as executive coaching, team building workshops, and interpersonal skills training can lead to significant improvements in leadership competencies, employee cohesion, and employee engagement (Grant, 2012). A meta-analysis by Jones et al. (2016) found that executive coaching interventions were associated with positive outcomes, including increased self-awareness, improved interpersonal skills, and enhanced leadership effectiveness. Similarly, research on team-building workshops suggests that structured interventions can enhance cohesion, trust, and communication among team members (Peterson et al., 2019).

Diamond (2001) emphasizes the potential for attachment-informed interventions to address deep-seated insecurities and relational challenges. By exploring the influence of early attachment experiences on current dynamics, co-founders can develop healthier interaction patterns, repair relational ruptures, and co-create a supportive work environment. Such interventions are particularly relevant in high-stress entrepreneurial contexts, where unresolved relational tensions can escalate rapidly.



## Challenges in Co-Founder Relationships

Despite the potential benefits of couple therapy and attachment-informed strategies, there are other contextual factors that put more pressure on this already fragile dynamic that can contribute to its dissolution. The high-stakes nature of entrepreneurship, coupled with the inherent uncertainties and pressures of building a business, can exacerbate existing attachment insecurities and interpersonal conflicts among co-founders. One common challenge is the blurring of boundaries between personal and professional domains within co-founder relationships. As individuals navigate the complexities of entrepreneurship together, it can be challenging to maintain a healthy balance between work responsibilities and personal well-being. This lack of boundary clarity can contribute to role confusion, resentment, and burnout within the co-founder partnership, ultimately undermining its effectiveness and cohesion.

The fast-paced and competitive nature of the start-up environment can exacerbate attachment-related anxieties and insecurities among co-founders. The constant pressure to innovate, pivot, and adapt to changing market conditions can trigger heightened levels of stress and uncertainty, leading co-founders to withdraw emotionally, avoid difficult conversations, or resort to micromanagement and control tactics as coping mechanisms. In the modern workplace, organizations experience the constant pressure to grow. Everyone in an organization, from the top-down, is expected to work longer hours, take on more responsibilities, and complete tasks in increasingly aggressive timescales (Overall, 2018; Overall, 2020; Overall, 2021a; Overall, 2021b). Although entrepreneurs are praised for their high quality-of-life with entrepreneurial failure rates close to 80% (Overall, 2016), the life of the entrepreneur can be stressful leading to mental health challenges. Compared to the public, entrepreneurs are 50% more likely to suffer from a mental health condition. They are two times more likely to suffer from depression, six times more likely to suffer from ADHD, three times more likely to suffer from substance abuse, two times more likely to have suicidal thoughts, ten times more likely to suffer from bipolar disorder, and two times more likely to require psychiatric hospitalization (Freeman et al., 2015; Overall, 2020).

Research by Peterson et al. (2019) highlights the detrimental effects of dysfunctional leadership dynamics within co-founder partnerships on organizational performance and team dynamics. Co-founders who exhibit high levels of conflict, power struggles, and distrust are more likely to experience turnover, burnout, and reduced productivity among team members, further exacerbating the risk of business failure. Furthermore, conflicts arising from divergent visions, goals, and values can pose significant challenges to co-founder relationships. While healthy debate and constructive disagreement are essential for innovation and growth, unresolved conflicts can escalate into power struggles, resentment, and ultimately, the dissolution of the partnership. Without effective

communication and conflict resolution mechanisms in place, co-founders may find themselves trapped in a cycle of dysfunction and disengagement, hindering the progress and success of the venture.

## **Foundational practices for building healthy relationships**

In addition to addressing attachment-related challenges, couple therapy for co-founders can integrate attachment-informed strategies into business practices to enhance collaboration and productivity. Therapists may collaborate with co-founders to establish clear communication protocols, set mutual goals and expectations, and create a culture of psychological safety and support within the workplace (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Research by Peterson et al. (2019) underscores the importance of fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose within co-founder partnerships to promote attachment security and organizational success. By aligning business objectives with relational needs, therapy sessions empower co-founders to leverage their attachment strengths and navigate challenges with resilience and confidence.

Moreover, attachment-informed strategies can inform leadership practices, decision-making processes, and conflict resolution mechanisms within the business partnership. By fostering a culture of collaboration, empathy, and mutual respect, therapy sessions contribute to the long-term viability and sustainability of the venture, while also enhancing the well-being and satisfaction of the co-founders (Diamond, 2001). Beyond this, there are several best practices that can be used as a foundation to build healthier co-founder relationships.

### **Reflective listening**

Reflective listening, often considered a cornerstone of effective communication, is critical for fostering trust and understanding in relationships. Research supports the importance of active listening, which involves focused attention, providing feedback, maintaining nonjudgmental attitudes, and appropriately responding (Weger et al., 2014). These elements collectively promote empathetic connections and reduce misunderstandings. Studies indicate that nonverbal cues, such as eye contact and body language, form up to 80% of communication, emphasizing the importance of undivided attention (Burgoon et al., 2016). Furthermore, reflective listening is tied to emotional validation, which strengthens relational bonds and enhances conflict resolution (Gordon, 2008).

Holding space, an extension of reflective listening, entails being fully present with another person, allowing them to express themselves without interruption or judgment (Porges, 2011). Neurobiological research highlights that feeling heard activates the ventral vagal complex, a component of the parasympathetic nervous system, promoting feelings of safety and connection (Coan & Sbarra, 2015).

## **Solution-oriented**

Effective problem-solving requires a solution-oriented mindset, but research underscores the necessity of first comprehensively understanding the problem before transitioning to solutions. Prematurely jumping to solutions can exacerbate misunderstandings and leave issues unresolved (Kolb & Williams, 2001). Empirical studies demonstrate that problem-focused coping—addressing the root causes of issues—is more effective in reducing interpersonal conflict than avoidance strategies (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Moreover, creativity in problem-solving has been linked to improved relational outcomes, fostering collaborative innovation (Amabile & Khaire, 2008).

## **Celebrate positive experiences**

Acknowledging positive experiences is essential for maintaining relational health. The broaden-and-build theory suggests that positive emotions broaden individuals' cognitive and behavioral repertoires, enhancing their ability to build enduring resources (Fredrickson, 2001). Celebrating successes cultivates gratitude, which is associated with higher levels of relational satisfaction and resilience (Algoe et al., 2010). Empirical evidence indicates that couples and co-founders who regularly express appreciation experience greater relational stability and reduced conflict (Gottman & Silver, 2015).

## **Allocate appropriate time**

Addressing relational challenges requires dedicating sufficient time to foster constructive dialogue. Research highlights that rushed conversations often lead to miscommunications and unresolved tensions (Birditt et al., 2005). Scheduled, uninterrupted time for discussions can prevent issues from escalating into chronic dissatisfaction (Halford et al., 2007). This practice aligns with findings that intentional time allocation improves emotional regulation and conflict resolution (Laurenceau et al., 2004).

## **Relationship building**

Regularly engaging in non-work-related activities strengthens relational bonds. Studies on team dynamics reveal that shared experiences outside of formal work contexts enhance trust, cohesion, and morale (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014). Additionally, recreational activities stimulate creativity and reduce stress, fostering a more harmonious working relationship (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). 'Getting out of the building' is often used to stimulate creativity and build morale.

Although doing this regularly might be perceived as a waste of time, it's an investment in fostering healthier dynamics.

### **Managing expectations**

Clear and ongoing communication of expectations is vital for minimizing misunderstandings. Research underscores the role of expectation alignment in reducing conflict and promoting goal congruence (Thompson & Choi, 2006). Writing down and sharing expectations facilitates accountability and transparency, creating a shared understanding of responsibilities and goals (Locke & Latham, 2002).

### **Window of tolerance**

To preserve the relationship, it is essential that both parties be aware of their 'window of tolerance'. The window of tolerance describes the optimal range of emotional arousal within which an individual can effectively cope with stressors and engage in daily activities (Siegel, 1999). When people are in their window of tolerance, they are present, calm, and grounded. They can address issues fairly and reasonably. They can be accountable and take ownership. Individuals within their window of tolerance can think clearly, regulate their emotions, and maintain stable relationships. However, when stressors exceed this optimal range, individuals may experience hyperarousal (such as anxiety, anger, or panic) or hypoarousal (such as dissociation or numbness) (Ogden et al., 2006). When the emotions of the parties rise, if they become angry, or overwhelmed, they have likely exceeded their window of tolerance and are unable to progress appropriately. When emotions peak in a moment of disagreement, it is vital, to the health of the relationship, for both parties to set a time to revisit the issue. Comparably, when people are tired, uninterested, zoned out, or distracted, they are also out of their window of tolerance. The goal of therapy often revolves around helping individuals expand their window of tolerance, thereby increasing their capacity to manage stress and navigate life's challenges effectively (Herman, 1992).

### **Argue in private**

Conflict management literature emphasizes the importance of addressing disagreements privately to maintain professional decorum and reduce workplace anxiety (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Public conflicts can erode trust and create a toxic organizational culture, whereas constructive private discussions promote resolution and mutual respect (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). That is not to say that there cannot be healthy disagreements, debate, and critique. It's toxic fighting that should be avoided in public.

## IMPLICATIONS

Addressing the intricate dynamics of co-founder relationships requires a holistic, evidence-based approach grounded in principles from organizational psychology, couple therapy, and attachment theory. Practitioners and organizations should focus on fostering psychological safety, trust, and mutual respect as foundational pillars to enable collaboration, innovation, and the longevity of these partnerships (Overall & Gonzalez-Jiminez, 2024). This could help in increasing subjective happiness among founders (Overall & Gedeon, 2023).

Emotional intelligence (EI) plays a pivotal role in co-founder relationships, influencing interpersonal interactions and conflict resolution. Research highlights that high EI, including self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation, significantly predicts team cohesion and effectiveness (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2013). Encouraging co-founders to explore their attachment styles and interpersonal dynamics allows for more empathetic and attuned interactions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). For instance, individuals with secure attachment styles tend to demonstrate greater relational resilience, which translates into better problem-solving and cooperation under stress (Fraleay, 2019).

A misalignment of values, goals, and expectations often lies at the root of co-founder disputes. Structured interventions, such as facilitated discussions or value-alignment workshops, can mitigate this risk by clarifying shared objectives and fostering mutual understanding (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016). Research in organizational behavior emphasizes the importance of explicitly defining roles and responsibilities, which reduces role ambiguity and minimizes the potential for power struggles (Tubre & Collins, 2000). Furthermore, goal-setting theory posits that the establishment of specific, measurable, and mutually agreed-upon goals enhances motivation and task performance (Locke & Latham, 2002).

Regularly scheduled check-ins allow co-founders to proactively address emerging issues and strengthen their partnership. Evidence from relational maintenance research underscores the value of consistent, intentional efforts to nurture relationships (Dainton & Stafford, 1993). These sessions can serve as a space for reflective listening, shared celebrations of progress, and the recalibration of goals, fostering sustained alignment and collaboration.

The findings of this study have broader implications for STEM education, particularly in research collaborations and interdisciplinary projects where professionals must work closely under high-stakes conditions. In STEM academic environments, co-researchers, faculty partnerships, and student-led innovation teams experience relational dynamics similar to co-founders in entrepreneurial settings. By incorporating training on interpersonal relationship management—such as active listening, conflict resolution, and attachment-based communication—STEM programs can enhance collaboration and productivity

among students and faculty. Future research should explore how structured interventions, such as mentorship programs that incorporate these principles, can improve team dynamics in STEM education.

## CONCLUSION

Co-founder relationships play a pivotal role in the success and sustainability of start-ups and small businesses. By integrating principles from couple therapy and adult attachment theory, co-founders can find support in cultivating secure relational bonds, enhancing communication, and fostering collaboration within their partnership. For business leaders, in general, integrating psychotherapy principles into leadership practices can enhance their effectiveness in managing interpersonal dynamics, resolving conflicts, and promoting employee well-being. By cultivating self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and relational skills, leaders can create a positive work environment conducive to employee engagement, creativity, and innovation (Goleman, 1998). Moreover, organizations can benefit from implementing psychotherapy-informed interventions at the organizational level, such as culture change initiatives, conflict resolution processes, and employee assistance programs. By prioritizing employee mental health and well-being, organizations can reduce turnover, absenteeism, and workplace stress, while also fostering a culture of resilience and adaptability (Seligman et al., 2005).

Future researchers may wish to investigate how relational frameworks support STEM-based startups. This research could involve comparisons involving startups with access to relational support with those who do not. Researchers may also wish to investigate the impact of communication training on STEM research teams using mixed methods approaches.

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