How Involved Should Founders Really Be in R&D Time Tracking?

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Asking engineers to log their time is often met with muted pushback. This reaction is understandable, as engineers are generally evaluated on what they deliver, not the time they spent stuck on a problem. When a founder introduces time logging of R&D without explaining its benefits, the process can seem mismatched to how team members are assessed, resulting in a sense of friction that founders must struggle against.

It's important to understand that while R&D tracking supports innovation and funding, it can also create concern about stricter surveillance of work and a heavier paperwork burden. The founder's role in R&D therefore should be less about checking employees' time entries and more about setting the culture and environment around the process.

Why the resistance is reasonable, not just cultural

If a founder introduces R&D time-logging with the same framing as a productivity measure, team members will have a harder time fully getting on board. This resistance tends to be worse in businesses where revenue isn't directly tied to billable hours or labour quotation, where increased tracking can feel arbitrary unless the reason is made explicit. A new or upgraded reporting workflow can sound like it could stall work and produce duplicate information already recorded elsewhere.

The reframe that actually works

Engineers are more likely to support the process when the burden is proportionate, the tracking method is responsive to their situation, and the data's purpose is clear. Founders should explain what the data supports (beyond tax credits), who can access it, and what it will not be used for. Companies that commit to a low-friction workflow and invite employees to identify inefficiencies or pain points in the R&D tracking process tend to face less resistance and more committed process adoption.

What this means in practice

How much a founder should personally get involved depends on how the company is structured. In founder-led organisations, the founder usually needs to model the behaviour and communicate the "why" directly, at least initially. Once the purpose has landed and an accountable process owner is in place, the operating process can be delegated. The founder remains responsible for sponsorship, resolving organisational barriers, and using the outputs in real decisions. Continued involvement at a granular level can weaken trust and add management overhead. Ultimately, employees should be able to explain why the process exists, what is expected, and how the information will be used if you expect them to meaningfully adopt a new tracking regimen.