Conversation Arc 4: Capacity and Commitment

Founder Alignment Conversation User Guide

Objective

Assess whether the academic has realistic capacity to engage meaningfully given their current life, role, and obligations. Arc 4 addresses if an individual has the capacity and role clarity to engage meaningfully in entrepreneurship without overextending themselves.

Core prompts:

“How much time could you realistically devote over the next 12-18 months?”

“What other obligations might compete with this effort?”

“Would you be willing to bring in or defer to an external operator?”

Deepening questions:

“If this started to demand more time than expected, what would give?”

“How do you feel about stepping back into an advisor role?”

What to Look For:

Reminder: Red, yellow, green is not a grade (i.e., red does not mean failure) and the facilitator should focus on patterns and overall sentiment.

Green Signals (Realistic capacity and role clarity)

- Provides specific time estimates (hours/week) not aspirational goals
- Identifies competing obligations and discusses which could flex
- Seasonal constraints (teaching, grants) are named and planned around

- Open to advisory role if capacity doesn't support operational leadership
- Discusses what would 'give' if time demands exceeded expectations
- Has had conversation with family/partner about time commitment
- Can articulate what value they uniquely bring vs what others could do better

Yellow Signals (Capacity exists but requires trade-offs)

- Time estimate is optimistic but grounded in past experience
- Multiple competing obligations but willing to deprioritize some
- Seasonal flexibility is limited but workable
- Needs to maintain research group but could reduce grant writing
- Role preference is operational but acknowledges advisory role as backup
- Family/personal obligations are manageable but will create tension

Red Signals (Capacity-reality mismatch)

- Time estimate is aspirational with no discussion of what would give
- "I'll find the time" without naming what gets deprioritized
- Currently overcommitted and adding venture to the pile
- No flexibility in teaching, grants, or existing commitments
- Expects to lead company while maintaining full research program
- Family/personal circumstances suggest crisis rather than margin
- Cannot articulate unique contribution; believes they must do everything

Decision Aid Questions

After Arc 4, ask yourself:

1. Is their time estimate grounded in reality or hope?

- Reality-based: Capacity matches pathway demands
- Hope-based: Risk of burnout or disengagement

2. What is their actual available time over next 12-18 months?

- 20+ hours/week with flexibility: Could co-lead early-stage spinout

- 10-15 hours/week: Technical advisor or licensing makes more sense
- <10 hours/week: Pause or licensing only

3. Can they name what they uniquely contribute?

- Yes, and it's specific: Role clarity exists
- No, or "everything": Role confusion will create friction

4. Are they willing to evolve their role over time?

- Yes: Can scale with company needs
- No: May block company growth or burn out

5. What happens when time demands exceed estimates?

- They reprioritize: Commitment is real
- Everything stays: Venture becomes side project or fails