THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE / 11 MIN READ

The Fractional COO Handbook

Somewhere between 'doing everything yourself' and 'hiring a $200K executive' is the model built for growing businesses: senior operating leadership, fractionally. Here's how it works, what it costs, and how to know if you're ready.

Every growing business hits the same wall: the systems that got you here — meaning you, personally, deciding everything — stop scaling before the opportunity does. Owners feel it as a calendar problem first: weeks consumed by firefighting, evenings consumed by the books, and the work only the owner can do (selling, strategy, relationships) squeezed into the margins. Run your own numbers on what that costs with the **owner-dependence calculator** **(colemanma.com/services/fractional-coo/#calculator)** — for most owners it's a six-figure annual leak.

$200K+
what a full-time COO runs before benefits and equity — leadership priced to a need you may not have yet

15+ hrs
a week owners often lose to operations they could move off their desk

5–50
the employee band where the fractional model fits: real need for executive operations, rarely forty hours of it

Figures are illustrative, not a CMA client result.

What a fractional COO actually is

A fractional COO is a senior operator who takes real responsibility for how your business runs — on a part-time, embedded basis. Not a coach who asks you questions. Not a consultant who leaves a deck. An operator who joins your operating rhythm, owns outcomes, and builds the machinery: processes, accountability, reporting, and the systems underneath them.

The "fractional" part is the economic unlock: businesses between roughly five and fifty employees genuinely need executive-grade operations leadership, but rarely need — or can justify — forty hours of it a week. Fractional engagement prices the leadership to the actual need. (For the fuller argument, see **why you need a COO before you think you do** (colemanma.com/blog/why-your-business-needs-a-coo-even-if-youre-not-a-big-company-yet/).)

Six signs you're ready

- **You are the bottleneck.** Every decision routes through you; your absence stalls the company. The business has a single point of failure, and it's the founder.
- **Processes live in heads.** Quality depends on which person does the task. Nothing is documented; training a new hire means shadowing for months. (Documentation is the cure — **SOPs are how small businesses scale** (colemanma.com/blog/the-power-of-internal-sops-why-standard-operating-procedures-are-essential-for-small-business-growth/).)
- **Reporting is archaeology.** Knowing how the business is doing requires digging — month-end spreadsheets, gut feel, or the bank balance as a dashboard.
- **Growth makes things worse.** Every new customer adds chaos instead of leverage — the classic signal that you're scaling effort, not systems.
- **Cash surprises you.** Profitable on paper, tight in the account. **Cash problems are usually operations problems** (colemanma.com/blog/why-cash-flow-problems-are-usually-operations-problems-and-how-to-fix-the-disconnect/) wearing a disguise.
- **You've stopped doing owner work.** Weeks pass without a sales conversation or a strategic decision, because operations ate them.

Two or more of these, sustained for a quarter, and the question isn't whether you need operational leadership — it's only which form to buy it in.

> *The business has a single point of failure, and it's the founder. A fractional COO exists to remove it.*

What the work actually looks like

An embedded operations engagement typically runs four workstreams in parallel:

- **Operating cadence** — a weekly rhythm of priorities, owners, and follow-ups, so execution stops depending on memory and mood. This is where accountability becomes a system instead of a personality trait.
- **Process & documentation** — workflows mapped as they actually run (not as everyone assumes they run), bottlenecks identified, and SOPs written so the standard survives staff turnover and absence.
- **Visibility** — dashboards on the handful of numbers that drive your model: cash position, pipeline, throughput, labor efficiency. Decisions that waited on month-end start happening same-day. (More: **the missing layer between strategy and execution** (colemanma.com/blog/operational-coo-support-the-missing-layer-between-strategy-and-execution/).)
- **Owner leverage** — deliberately moving decisions, vendors, and routines off the founder's desk, with the structure to keep them off.

At CMA this work happens **on site** — you can't fix a workflow you've never watched. The **footwear franchisor engagement** (colemanma.com/case-studies/texas-footwear-franchisor/) shows the pattern: founder knowledge converted into a documented operating system a stranger could run.

> **THE BOTTOM LINE**
>
> A fractional COO isn't advice you have to implement alone — it's an operator who does the work with your team. The deliverable isn't a deck; it's a business that runs to a documented standard when the founder steps away.

Fractional vs. full-time vs. consultant

	Fractional COO	Full-time COO	Traditional consultant
What you get	Embedded senior operator, part-time, owns outcomes	Dedicated executive, full-time	Analysis and recommendations
Cost shape	Scoped retainer or hourly; scales with need	Six-figure salary + benefits + equity, regardless of need	Project fee, then you implement alone
Implementation	Included — they do the work with your team	Included	Usually not — the deck is the deliverable
Risk	Low — adjust or end as needs change	High — recruiting risk, payroll commitment, severance	Medium — value depends on your capacity to execute it
Right when	5–50 employees, founder-bottlenecked, scaling	Complexity genuinely demands 40+ exec hours/week	You need an answer, not an operator

What it costs

A full-time COO is a $200K+ annual commitment before benefits and equity — appropriate when the operation truly needs forty executive hours a week, and an expensive mistake when it doesn't. Fractional pricing follows the need instead: at CMA, hands-on **operational support starts at $75/hour** (colemanma.com/services/fractional-coo/#operations), and ongoing fractional COO retainers are scoped and fixed on the intro call. The honest comparison isn't against zero, though — it's against the cost of the status quo: the owner-hours currently absorbed by operations, the errors from undocumented process, and the growth not pursued because nobody had bandwidth to pursue it. (**Why 2026 is the year this model went mainstream** (colemanma.com/blog/unlocking-hidden-potential-why-every-small-business-needs-a-fractional-coo-in-2026/).)

IN PRACTICE

Before you price a fractional engagement, price the status quo. Add up the owner-hours operations eats each week, the errors that trace back to undocumented process, and the growth nobody has bandwidth to pursue. That number is what you're really comparing against.

The first 90 days

An embedded engagement moves through three phases in its first quarter:

1

WEEKS 1–3

See the real operation

On site, watching the work happen — mapping workflows as they are, interviewing the team, and finding the bottlenecks that cost the most. The diagnosis comes from the floor, not a questionnaire.

2

WEEKS 3–8

Build the machinery

The operating cadence installed, the highest-leverage processes redesigned and documented, dashboards stood up on live data, and the first set of decisions moved off the owner's desk.

3

WEEKS 8–13

Make it hold

The team running the cadence with coaching, the metrics tracking against the baseline from week one, and a clear-eyed call about what the ongoing engagement should be — heavier, lighter, or handed off entirely.

Done right, day 90 looks like this: the owner's calendar has owner-work on it again, the business has numbers instead of vibes, and the operation runs to a documented standard. That's the deliverable. If it's the one you need, start with the **Fractional COO & Operations practice** **(colemanma.com/services/fractional-coo/)** — or take the **60-second fit quiz** **(colemanma.com/fit/)** if you're weighing it against other moves.
