



SCALING STRATEGICALLY

A Guide to Talent-Led Growth in Life Sciences

By Jord Teeuwen



Biography :

QTC is the strategic talent partner for Life Sciences companies in Western Europe. With over 15 years of experience, we connect companies and investors with top talent to drive innovation. Our expertise in scaling businesses across Western Europe and the U.S., combined with a global network, provides us with unmatched insight into biotechnology, medical devices, and food sciences.

Beyond placements, we fuel progress by offering talent analytics, benchmarking, and consultancy to help Life Sciences organizations stay ahead.

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Scaling Strategically: A Guide to Talent-Led Growth in Life Sciences

Scaling a biotech, food tech, agro innovation, or medtech company isn't just about growing headcount it's about hiring the right people at the right moment. Structuring your team is just as critical as developing your product or protecting your IP.

A wrong hire, especially in the leadership team, can derail funding, delay timelines, and erode investor confidence. In sectors tackling real-world challenges like health, food security, and sustainability, those delays aren't just inconvenient they can be fatal.

The reality? Most early-stage ventures especially those led by first-time technical founders don't have a clear or consistent approach to hiring. Everyone has an opinion (particularly in syndicated VC setups), but few follow a structured process. And this isn't just a start-up issue, misalignment on hiring is common even in experienced leadership teams.

In incubator and TTO settings, the focus often leans heavily on pitch decks, IP strategy, and fundraising not on the people who will actually build and scale the business. But you can't outsource leadership, team cohesion, or long-term hiring strategy. Get it wrong early, and it becomes increasingly difficult to course-correct.

Firms like McKinsey and BCG do a good job outlining what ideal people strategies look like but let's be honest: if you're running a 30 FTE company or just started your venture with hundreds of priorities, you need something that actually works in real life.

That's why we put this guide together. It combines strategic rigour with practical tools you can use as investor or founder today, not just frameworks to admire.

Best regards,

Jord Teeuwen
Managing Partner
QTC





Introduction:

The journey from startup to scale-up involves a series of inflection points, each requiring different leadership traits, technical expertise, and organisational design. Hiring more people isn't the answer hiring the *right* people, with the *right* behavioural fit for the *right* moment, is. This guide is built to help leadership teams and investors anticipate those moments. Using proven frameworks such as the Greiner Growth Model, insights on cognitive and strategic diversity, and the 9-Box Talent Grid, we provide a structured methodology to scale with intention not improvisation.

Step 1: Start by Knowing Yourself

Before defining your organisation's purpose, start with yourself. Every great leader begins by understanding their own leadership style, strengths, and flaws. This self-awareness forms the foundation of authentic leadership.

➔ Exercise:

Ask yourself:

1. What is my default leadership style, and how does it shift under pressure?
2. How do I typically respond to ambiguity, failure, or conflict?
3. Do I empower others easily, or do I tend to retain control?
4. Where do I add the most value and where do I get in the way?
5. What motivates me: impact, recognition, mastery, autonomy?

When you understand your own behavioural patterns, cognitive biases, and emotional triggers, you can actively hire and build leadership teams that fill in your blind spots rather than mirror them. Great leaders don't just drive strategy they design environments in which complementary talents can thrive.

➔ Exercise:

Perferably do something similar if you are running as Co-founders on each other and be brutally honest.



Step 2: Anchor in Purpose and Values

Define the "Why" Every successful scale-up begins with a clear purpose. In science-driven sectors, this often means tackling existential global issues: eradicating disease, enabling sustainable agriculture, or reducing food insecurity. Purpose fuels resilience and direction.

Most companies are fairly good at identifying why they started (if not do the underneath exercise). But the real benefit of a strong purpose lies in its ability to guide everything you do how you hire, how you lead, how you resolve trade-offs and where you focus. A purpose should not just inspire; it should be operationalised in the context of daily work. The more consistently it is embedded across decisions and behaviours, the more it becomes a tool for alignment, culture building, and sustainable momentum.

Don't just list values turn them into clear, measurable behaviours people can apply in their day-to-day work.

➔ Make values operational exercise:

1. Map each value to concrete behaviours per function—e.g., what does "We collaborate" look like in R&D vs. Business Development?
2. Include these behaviours in onboarding, performance reviews, and team retros.
3. Prompt teams to reflect: *"How have you lived one of our values this quarter?"*

The goal: everyone should confidently say, *"I know what these values mean for me in my role."* That's how you embed values into daily work not just culture decks.

Avoid cultural drift by translating values into daily habits, so they drive how science is done, deals are closed, and teams align.

➔ Values Exercise:

1. Run a workshop where you and the team identify 75–150 possible values.
2. Narrow down to 4–5 that reflect your mission.
3. Translate into "We" statements with active verbs (create, engage, commit).
4. Embed these into your recruitment scorecards and performance reviews.



Step 3: Anticipate Growth with the Greiner Model

The **Greiner Growth Model** provides a roadmap for predictable crises and leadership transitions. Each growth phase doesn't just call for more people it calls for different kinds of people. The personalities and leadership behaviours that help you launch a company may not be what you need to scale it or sustain it.

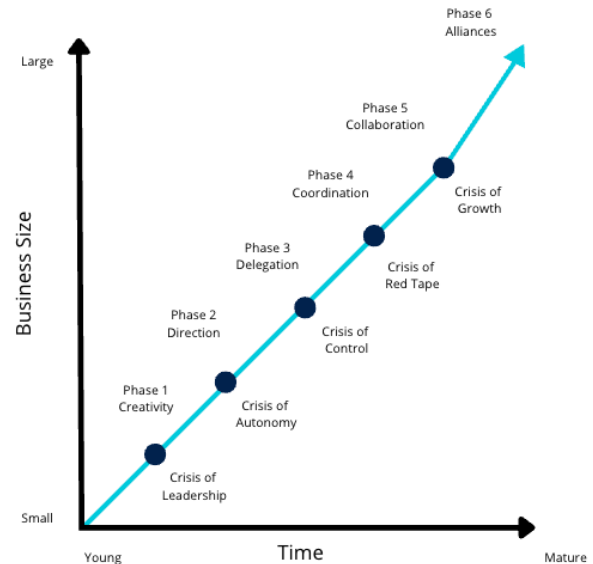
At each transition point, founders and investors should ask not just "what role do we need?" but "what behavioural and cognitive traits does this phase demand?"

Each growth phase is highly comparable across companies, regardless of size or sector. Running a 20 FTE organisation versus a 2,000 FTE one simply requires different traits, structures, and processes. Yet the progression from one stage to the next follows a remarkably predictable path. Just as in scientific experimentation or product development, scaling is milestone-based each step has its own known challenges and requirements.

While founders and investors often focus heavily on the technology or product, you should already have a clear understanding of what your organisation will require *if* it does scale. The Greiner Growth Model helps to objectify these phases and make the intangible predictable. By recognising what lies ahead, you can plan proactively for future organisational needs in the same way you'd pre-plan R&D pipelines or clinical trial phases.

Someone who thrives in chaos and early-stage creativity might stall in highly regulated, process-driven environments. Likewise, an executive brought in for operational rigour may suffocate early momentum if hired too soon. Rather than simply adding talent that fits a job title, define the technical *and* behavioural profile your team needs to hit its next milestone.

Greiner's Growth Model





➔ Exercise:

Apply this model as a joint compass for both investors and executives. Define which phase you're in, what crisis is next (e.g. "crisis of control"), and what leadership traits are needed to avoid it. Crucially, this should not be done in isolation. Compare what traits and capabilities the phase demands with what you already have in-house both at the company level and within specific teams. This allows you to identify not just skill gaps, but also mismatches in mindset or leadership behaviours that could stall progress. Aligning future needs with current team dynamics ensures you aren't only hiring reactively, but building a resilient organisation proactively.

Step 4: Leverage the 9-Box Grid for Talent Planning

Once you've mapped the leadership behaviours and cognitive traits required for your next growth phase using the Greiner Growth Model and compared these with the traits already present in your teams you can take the next step: evaluating how well your current people fit into that forward-looking picture.

This is where the 9-Box Talent Matrix becomes particularly valuable. By overlaying the leadership demands of each growth phase with individual performance and potential, you create a dynamic tool to assess risk, capability gaps, and succession needs. It also allows you to pre-emptively align your talent roadmap with projected company milestones.

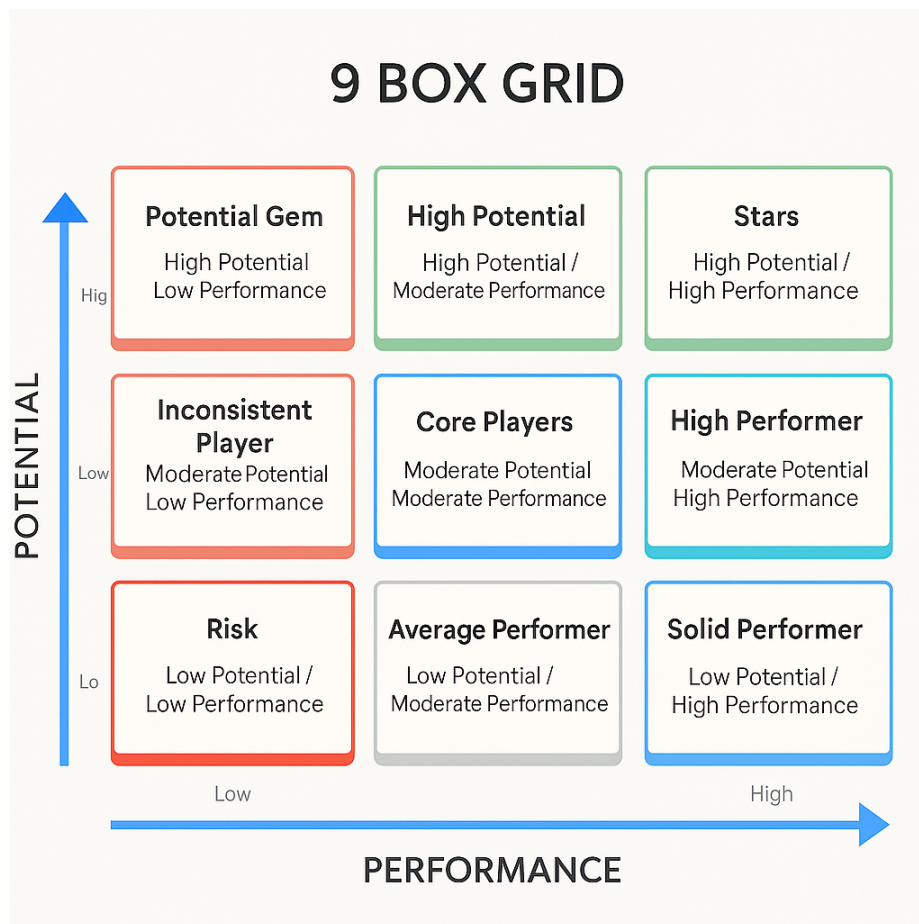
Importantly, this framework is not only internal it becomes a strategic asset in discussions with your remuneration committee, board, or investors. Rather than relying on subjective impressions or 'gut feel' when discussing talent, you can offer a structured, benchmarked view of individual contribution and organisational fit.

This shifts talent discussions from reactive debates to objective, forward-planning exercises. For example, if you're entering Phase 2 (50–100 FTE) and you can demonstrate that your current team lacks autonomous leadership capacity in commercial roles, you can justify early hiring plans or interim appointments with evidence not just intuition.

Likewise, for compensation benchmarking, the 9-box allows you to clearly differentiate between roles or individuals that warrant retention investment versus those that may require reassignment or performance management. In essence, you're not just building a team you're building alignment. Across people, processes, and expectations.



Use the **9-Box Talent Matrix** (by McKinsey) to categorise leadership potential and performance:



Update the matrix quarterly to guide:

- Succession planning.
- Internal promotions.
- External hiring needs.



Step 5: Navigate Syndicated VC Hiring Challenges

Where It Breaks Down (and Why It's Not as Straightforward as It Looks)

Hiring at leadership level isn't just about finding someone good. It's about timing, alignment, and having a shared understanding of what the business actually needs. And in founder-led or investor-backed companies, that clarity is often a moving target. A few things we see often:

- Misalignment across the syndicate on comp, equity, or role scope can quietly slow things down. It's rarely about disagreement; more often it's just a lack of shared context or urgency, especially when no one feels directly responsible for making the final call.
- Remuneration committees are often working with generalised benchmarks that don't reflect early-stage realities. That doesn't make the process wrong, just harder especially when you're trying to attract leadership talent who expect clarity and speed.
- Founders are told to "scale the team," but what that means in practice is open to interpretation. Is it time to bring in a COO? A VP Commercial pre-Series B? Or keep things flat and nimble until the next raise? The *what* and *when* are rarely obvious.
- Transitions can be uncomfortable. Founders know they need to shift responsibilities, but deciding *what* to let go of, and *who* to trust with it, can feel risky especially when the company's still finding its rhythm.
- In spinouts or IP-heavy setups, structural questions around equity, decision rights, and ownership can blur who's actually driving the hiring process.
- Budget discussions get strategic fast. Do you use the available headcount for a leadership hire now, or push it toward a product milestone that could unlock funding? These are tough calls, with no clean answers.
- Boards often focus on experience and risk mitigation. Founders are looking for someone who fits the pace, culture, and mission. Both are valid lenses—but when they're not reconciled, hiring becomes a compromise that satisfies no one.



None of this is unusual. In fact, it's the norm. These are the structural reasons why leadership hiring often feels harder than it should be. It's rarely about a lack of candidates. It's usually an alignment issue. And when that's not resolved early, momentum turns into circular conversations and missed windows. That's why you need clarity from the start not just on the profile, but on the purpose of the hire and the reality of your stage.

Here's how to keep momentum:

- Bank on a process, not a person. Just because someone has worked with a key investor before or successfully scaled another portfolio company doesn't mean they're right for your team or growth phase. Investors bring strong networks, and often helpful instincts, but what worked in one company may not translate to another. Familiarity is not a hiring strategy. Anchor decisions in a structured, comparative process that reflects your company's actual needs.
- Always build optionality. You need 2–5 serious candidates, with at least one solid backup. Anything less and you're exposed one dropout, a shift in funding, or late-stage doubt can stall the entire process for months.
- Get ahead of the gridlock. Align early across the founder, board, and syndicate on comp, equity, and governance frameworks. Waiting until the hire is urgent creates unnecessary friction. If you're an investor sensing hesitation, or a founder unsure about role scope, raise it before the pressure kicks in.
- Flex where you can. Use trial-based involvement, one-day-a-week setups, or interim contracts to keep momentum without triggering full board sign-off. These structures buy time, build trust, and reduce commitment anxiety for both sides.
- Lower the barrier to entry. Invite key people to contribute in lightweight ways on a project, advisory, or pro bono basis with a clear path to formalise if the fit is right. Investors can help here too by framing these introductions as options, not obligations. Build the relationship before you need full consensus.



And the move most scale-ups overlook? Start headhunting before you're ready to hire. Build your shortlist now those 5–10 people who could elevate your story and energise your next round. These are your 'game changers', your future board slides.

In football or any team sport for that matter, a world-class addition doesn't just fill a role it lifts the entire squad and could make or break the game. Investors notice. Competitors adjust. Partners lean in. Strategic hires build credibility and create momentum. Just like fundraising, hiring is about readiness, timing, and conviction. Treat it with the same discipline.

Step 6: Build a Scalable Hiring Infrastructure

Hiring should evolve from being tactical and reactive to becoming strategic and proactive. Without that shift, you'll always be catching up and missing out.

Operationalise the fundamentals early:

- Set up an ATS: Even a lightweight Applicant Tracking System brings structure, improves visibility, and ensures faster internal alignment.
- Create a hiring roadmap: Tie key hires to business milestones. Know who you need *now*—and who you'll need 6 or 12 months from now.
- Use structured interviews and scorecards: Align your hiring process to the behaviours and values your company needs to scale successfully.
- Define salary and equity bands upfront: Set expectations early to avoid compensation chaos later.
- Build a live talent pipeline: Don't wait for vacancies to start tracking key candidates. Proactively nurture relationships with future game-changers—especially for strategic and leadership roles.

Scalable recruitment infrastructure doesn't mean bureaucracy it means readiness. When you've built the right systems, the right decisions get made faster. And your organisation stays in control, not reactive to the market or investor pressure.



And what can investors do?

Most investors already think in patterns. You have a focus area, a thesis, a preferred stage, a type of founder you back. That also means you're often looking for *similar types of leadership profiles* across different portfolio companies.

This is where a bit of modelling and strategic hiring infrastructure goes a long way something investors are already comfortable with. Just like you model capital efficiency or market entry, you can model what great leadership looks like at different stages and in different contexts. Instead of making talent decisions case-by-case, start building a common language around what good looks like across the portfolio.

This helps you:

- Support founders with clearer, stage-appropriate frameworks
- Shorten hiring cycles and increase decision quality
- Reduce personal bias especially in high-trust syndicates where “known” often trumps “fit”
- And show LPs that you don't just fund talent you build it

Especially in today's market where exits take longer and scaling timelines are more volatile your hiring approach may need to evolve alongside your investment thesis. What got companies funded two years ago won't necessarily get them sold or scaled today. Talent strategy should flex with that reality.



Final Word: Scale Through Process, Not Just People

Just as you'd apply a protocol to scientific development, your hiring strategy needs a clear roadmap. Frameworks like the Greiner Growth Model, AEM-Cube, and the 9-Box Grid help you move from reactive to proactive. They let you plan ahead, build around future organisational needs, and make talent a central part of your growth strategy—not an afterthought.

This approach also brings structure to your conversations with investors and remuneration committees. You're no longer relying on gut feel or internal politics. You're working with data-backed, benchmarked insights that de-risk decision-making and accelerate alignment at board level.

The right people, at the right time, in the right roles. That's how you scale with purpose, clarity, and lasting impact. People aren't just resources.

They are your multiplier. The shift from a 2-FTE idea to the next serious player in your field won't happen through capital alone it happens through the people you bring in, and the momentum they create. And that is something you can get good at.

Hiring is a trade you can learn. One that rewards structure, discipline, and intent.

It's my fundamental belief that people will always make the difference.

If you get this part right early and consistently everything else starts to move faster.


Closing Note

We hope this gives you something useful to reflect on whether you're a founder building your team, or an investor looking to support your portfolio more intentionally.

If any of this sparks questions, challenges, or ideas let's talk. We're happy to share more context, examples, or tools that can help you apply these principles to your own growth story.

Thanks for reading. We hope it inspires sharper conversations—and better decisions.

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