

2026 EDITION

The first 90 days of a Fractional CTO.

What actually gets audited, decided, and shipped in the first three months of an embedded engagement. Week-by-week. With the uncomfortable conversations most founders avoid until it's too late.

THE AUDIT

Before anyone ships anything, understand what's true.

The first two weeks are almost entirely listening, reading, and asking. No roadmap edits, no hires, no architecture decisions. If a Fractional CTO is shipping code in week one, something is wrong.

What gets audited

- Codebase health.** CI status, test coverage, deploy pain, on-call burden, time-to-rollback. Not style — health.
- Team reality.** 1:1s with every engineer. Who's leaving. Who's blocked. Who's being asked to do two jobs.
- Product roadmap vs reality.** What's on the Notion roadmap vs what's actually being shipped vs what customers ask for.
- Customer signal.** Read the last 90 days of support tickets. Every one. The patterns are the product.
- Financial runway.** Burn, runway, revenue trajectory. Technical decisions are downstream of cash.
- Vendor spend.** Every SaaS line. I usually find 10–25% in unused seats or duplicate tools within the first week.

THE UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS

What nobody wants to say out loud.

By week three, the picture is clear. Week four is when the uncomfortable truths get named — because nothing changes until they are.

Is this person still the right hire?

The senior engineer who was right for 5 people is sometimes not right for 15. Or the "CTO" title given too early to a founder now holding the team back. Named early, handled with dignity. Ignored until quarter three, toxic.

What are we paying for that we don't use?

The tools, the seats, the legacy contracts. One client had 11 tools doing overlapping jobs. Cutting down to 4 saved \$18k/year and reduced onboarding from 3 days to 1.

Is this product decision a feature or a bet?

A lot of roadmaps are features the loudest customer asked for — not strategic bets. Naming the difference, in writing, aligns the team on what actually matters.

Who owns what?

If three people think they own feature X, nobody does. The audit names the owner, writes it down, and the founder stops being the single point of failure.

FOUNDER TRUTH

A good Fractional CTO says the things your engineers can't say out loud and your advisors don't know enough to say. That's the actual job.

ARCHITECTURE + HIRES

One strategic bet per month. No more.

Month two is when strategy turns into moves. But the discipline is: one big architectural bet at a time. The teams that try to fix everything in parallel ship nothing.

What gets decided

- The one architectural simplification** that removes the biggest source of on-call pain. Not a rewrite — a cut or a merge.
- The next hire.** Role, level, comp band, interview loop. Scoped so the founder can hold the bar without the Fractional CTO present.
- The "not now" list.** What we're explicitly not doing this quarter. Public, so the team stops guessing.
- The deploy + on-call baseline.** Engineers deploy to prod without asking. On-call rotation is posted and dignified.
- The measurement system.** Dashboard with 5–10 metrics that answer "is the product healthy?" every Monday.

THE HANDOFF MODEL

The goal is to make the role disappear.

A Fractional CTO isn't hired to be permanent. The goal by month three is that the founder, the lead engineer, and the next senior hire can run the week-to-week without the Fractional. The engagement moves from embedded to advisory — same brain, fewer hours.

What shifts to the team

Weekly rituals (standup, deploy cadence, on-call). Code review bar. Hiring rubric. "Can we afford this?" heuristics. Documentation of every decision made in months 1–3.

What stays with me

Architecture reviews on anything cross-cutting. Next-level hire panel. Quarterly strategy check-ins. Escape hatch for the founder when things get weird.

DELIVERABLES BY DAY 90

- Technical audit doc** — what was true, what changed, what's next. Shared with founder + lead engineer.
- Org chart with single owners per surface.** No ambiguity about who ships what.
- Hiring plan** for the next 6 months with role briefs, comp bands, and interview loops documented.
- Deploy + on-call playbook** that engineers actually follow, not a Notion page nobody reads.
- Strategic roadmap** — one-page, what we're building this quarter and why, explicitly excluding what we're not.

Five signals you need a CTO before you need a CTO.

Most founders hire a full-time CTO 6 months too late and another 6 months too expensive. Fractional bridges the gap. These are the signals that the moment is now — not next quarter.

- You're writing code you shouldn't be writing.** Every hour the founder debugs is an hour not selling or hiring.
- Deploys scare you.** If Friday 4pm deploys are forbidden, the process is broken, not the engineers.
- You can't answer "why are we building this next?"** without a five-minute preamble. The roadmap isn't aligned with the bet.
- Your best engineer is talking to recruiters.** Usually because nobody is shielding them from product thrash.
- You have 5–15 engineers and no one who thinks about next year.** That's a Fractional CTO job, not a Senior Engineer job.

THINKING ABOUT BRINGING IN FRACTIONAL CTO HELP?

I work with early teams that need technical judgment before they can justify the full-time seat: architecture, hiring, roadmap pressure, and enough hands-on work to keep the advice honest.

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