

# Founder Mode leadership, AI’s “Bitter Lesson,” and a talk on x402 agentic payments

Recommended Reading from Tech Founders

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## Founder Mode leadership, AI’s “Bitter Lesson,” and a talk on x402 agentic payments

*By Recommended Reading from Tech Founders • February 20, 2026*

Today’s strongest picks cluster around founder leadership (“Founder Mode” + a related Chesky conversation), plus AI-first mental models (“The Bitter Lesson” and “keep your identity small”) and a founder-endorsed video on x402 agentic payments. Also included: a standout technical book and a few worldview-shaping fiction recommendations.

### Most compelling recommendation (highest operator leverage)

**Paul Graham — “Founder Mode” (essay)**

- **Title:** “Founder Mode” [1]
- **Content type:** Essay [1]
- **Author/creator:** Paul Graham [1]
- **Link/URL:** Not provided in the source excerpts
- **Who recommended it:** Garry Tan (Y Combinator President & CEO) [1]
- **Key takeaway (as shared):** Post-product-market fit, “leadership is...presence, not absence,” and the common advice to hire great people and “give them the keys to [the] kingdom” can backfire—creating “a company that I did not recognize.” [1]
- **Why it matters:** It’s a direct, experience-backed prompt for founders to stay actively involved as the company scales, especially after PMF when delegation patterns harden. [1]



“Leadership is like, is presence, not absence.” [1]  
*Garry Tan on the Past, Present, and Future of YC (45:00)*

#### Companion listen (same theme):

#### Social Radars — episode with Brian Chesky & Jessica Livingston on “Founder Mode” (podcast episode)

- **Title:** Social Radars episode on Founder Mode (Brian Chesky with Jessica Livingston) [1]
- **Content type:** Podcast episode [1]
- **Author/creator:** Social Radars (episode featuring Brian Chesky and Jessica Livingston) [1]
- **Link/URL:** Not provided in the source excerpts
- **Who recommended it:** Garry Tan [1]
- **Key takeaway (as shared):** Tan points to Chesky’s reflections (including remaking Airbnb during COVID) as a practical complement to the “Founder Mode” idea. [1]
- **Why it matters:** A founder-case narrative that Tan found instructive alongside the essay. [1]

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#### AI & building: principles + mental models

#### Richard Sutton — “The Bitter Lesson” (blog post)

- **Title:** “The Bitter Lesson” [2]
- **Content type:** Blog post [2]
- **Author/creator:** Richard Sutton [2]

- **Link/URL:** Not provided in the source excerpts
- **Who recommended it:** Boris Cherny (Head of Claude Code at Anthropic) [2]
- **Key takeaway (as shared):** “The more general model will always outperform the more specific model.” [2]
- **Why it matters:** A concise heuristic for AI product and research strategy—prioritizing general approaches over narrow, hand-crafted specialization. [2]

### “Keep your identity small” (essay/blog post)

- **Title:** Essay/blog post advising “keep your identity small” [3]
- **Content type:** Blog post / essay [3]
- **Author/creator:** A founder from Applied Intuition (name not specified) [3]
- **Link/URL:** Not provided in the source excerpts
- **Who recommended it:** Speaker A (in a conversation featuring Elad Gil) [3]
- **Key takeaway (as shared):** “Keep your identity small,” described as “wonderful overall advice for this period of time.” [3]
- **Why it matters:** A direct reminder to stay adaptable—avoid over-anchoring to a fixed self-concept while circumstances shift. [3]

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## Deep work: one technical book pick

### *Functional Programming in Scala* (book)

- **Title:** *Functional Programming in Scala* [2]
- **Content type:** Book [2]
- **Author/creator:** Not specified in the source excerpts
- **Link/URL:** Not provided in the source excerpts
- **Who recommended it:** Boris Cherny [2]
- **Key takeaway (as shared):** Called “the single best technical book” he’s read; highlights “elegance” in functional programming and “thinking in types,” and frames it as something that can “level you up.” [2]
- **Why it matters:** Recommended as a durable way to improve how you think about code—not just a language-specific manual. [2]

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## Fiction that shaped leaders’ thinking (and taste)

### J.R.R. Tolkien — *The Lord of the Rings* (book)

- **Title:** *The Lord of the Rings* [4]
- **Content type:** Book [4]

- **Author/creator:** J.R.R. Tolkien [4]
- **Link/URL (as shared):** <https://www.amazon.com/Lord-Rings-J-R-R-Tolkien/dp/0544003411> [4]
- **Who recommended it:** Markus Villig (Founder & CEO, Bolt) [4]
- **Key takeaway (as shared):** Villig credits it with shaping his worldview. [4]
- **Why it matters:** A rare, explicit “this shaped how I see the world” endorsement from a founder. [4]

#### “Strauss” — *Accelerando* (book)

- **Title:** *Accelerando* [2]
- **Content type:** Book [2]
- **Author/creator:** “Strauss” (as stated in the excerpt) [2]
- **Link/URL:** Not provided in the source excerpts
- **Who recommended it:** Boris Cherny [2]
- **Key takeaway (as shared):** Recommended for capturing “the essence of this moment” through its accelerating pace. [2]
- **Why it matters:** A narrative frame for understanding rapid technological change—recommended specifically for its sense of speed and escalation. [2]

#### Cixin Liu — *The Wandering Earth* (short story collection)

- **Title:** *The Wandering Earth* [2]
- **Content type:** Short story collection [2]
- **Author/creator:** Cixin Liu [2]
- **Link/URL:** Not provided in the source excerpts
- **Who recommended it:** Boris Cherny [2]
- **Key takeaway (as shared):** Highlighted for “amazing stories” and for offering a “different perspective than Western sci fi.” [2]
- **Why it matters:** A specific pointer to broaden creative inputs—both stylistically and culturally—via sci-fi with a distinct viewpoint. [2]

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## Business & crypto: two listens worth queuing

### *Acquired* — start with the Nintendo episode (podcast)

- **Title:** *Acquired* (podcast) [2]
- **Content type:** Podcast [2]
- **Author/creator:** Ben and David (as stated in the excerpt) [2]
- **Link/URL:** Not provided in the source excerpts
- **Who recommended it:** Boris Cherny [2]
- **Key takeaway (as shared):** Praised for making “business history...alive,” with a specific suggestion to begin with a Nintendo episode.

[2]

- **Why it matters:** A concrete entry point into a long-running show—recommended for clarity and storytelling around business history. [2]

#### @programmer at EthereumDenver — talk on the x402 protocol for agentic payments (video)

- **Title:** Talk on the x402 protocol for agentic payments [5]
- **Content type:** Video talk [5]
- **Author/creator:** @programmer [6]
- **Link/URL (as shared):** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MeTEQ4pHv3U> [6]
- **Who recommended it:** Brian Armstrong (Coinbase CEO) [5]
- **Key takeaway (as shared):** Armstrong calls it a “Good talk” on x402 for agentic payments. [5]
- **Why it matters:** A direct founder endorsement of a concrete technical talk in the “agentic payments” space. [5]

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#### Sources

1. Garry Tan on the Past, Present, and Future of YC
2. Head of Claude Code: What happens after coding is solved | Boris Cherny
3. Is the SaaS that we know coming to an end?
4. How Bolt Survived An 85% Revenue Crash And Became Europe’s Ride-Hailing Champion (Markus Villig, Founder & CEO)
5. X post by @brian\_armstrong
6. X post by @CoinbaseDev