

The Recipe: SOPs

THE 50 FACTOR — GROWTH FACTOR #25

SOPs: The Recipe for Repeatable Excellence

The Complete Implementation Guide

BY SCOTT SCULLY



Principle #25: SOPs: The Recipe for Repeatable Excellence

The Complete Implementation Guide

This white paper is a companion to Chapter 25 of The 50 Factor by Scott Scully.

Why This Growth Factor Matters

A mentor took his protégé to a cooking class in the Hill — St. Louis's Italian neighborhood. A compact Italian woman named Rosa handed them a recipe and said: "Read it all the way through before you touch anything."

They followed the recipe step by step. Flour, eggs, olive oil, salt. Specific measurements. Specific steps. Specific timing. A note about what the dough should feel like at each stage. A warning about what happens if you overwork it. They cooked. Rosa watched. She corrected the kneading. She adjusted the flour ratio. The pasta came out perfectly.

"You want to know why it worked?" Rosa said. "Because you followed the recipe."

SOPs are recipes for your business. They capture the best way to perform a specific repeating task so that anyone trained on them can produce a consistent result. Just like Rosa's recipe ensures the pasta comes out the same whether she makes it or a first-timer makes it, an SOP ensures that a client onboarding, a quality review, or a proposal submission comes out the same whether your best person does it or your newest hire does it. Playbooks without SOPs are cookbooks without recipes — they tell you what to make but not how.

The Three-Step Build Process

Step 1: Identify every repeating task. Sit with the manager of a function and list every task the role performs daily, weekly, and monthly. Most functions have 8-15 repeating tasks. List them all.

Step 2: Document the current best practice. Sit with your best performer. Watch them execute the task from start to finish. Ask them to narrate: "What are you doing? Why? What would happen if you skipped this step?" Write every step. Include screenshots. Include the why — not just the what — because understanding breeds compliance and judgment.

Step 3: Test with a novice. Hand the SOP to someone who's never done the task. Watch where they stumble. Every question they ask is a gap in the document. Fix it. The SOP is ready when a basically competent person can follow it and produce an acceptable result on their first attempt.

SOP Format Guidelines

Keep each SOP to 1-3 pages. Longer than 3 pages means the task should be broken into multiple SOPs. Include three formats for maximum adoption: a written document (for detail), a quick-reference checklist (for daily use), and a video walkthrough (for visual learners). The best companies use all three.

Every SOP includes: the purpose (why this task matters), prerequisites (what's needed before starting), steps (numbered, specific, with screenshots), quality check (how to verify the output before marking complete), and common mistakes (what goes wrong and how to prevent it).

The SOP Library

One central location. Organized by function. Searchable. Every SOP has an owner, a last-updated date, and a review cycle (quarterly for fast-changing processes, annually for stable ones). One SOP owner per function — approximately 1 hour per week to keep things current.

If an SOP hasn't been reviewed in 12 months, it's probably wrong. Processes evolve. Tools change. Client expectations shift. An outdated SOP is worse than no SOP because it teaches the wrong thing with the authority of a document.

Where to Start

Client-facing functions first: delivery, client services, sales. Top 5 highest-impact repeating tasks per function. Then expand outward — operations, marketing, HR. Long-tail SOPs for admin and edge cases build out over 12-18 months.

The cultural shift: SOPs aren't bureaucracy. They're freedom. When the routine is systematized, your team's mental energy goes to the exceptions — the creative, judgment-heavy, client-specific work that actually differentiates your company. SOPs handle the 80% that should be done the same way every time. Your people handle the 20% that requires thinking.

Common Mistakes

Mistake #1: Building SOPs in a conference room. Document what your best person actually does, not what you imagine the process should be.

Mistake #2: Making them too long. 1-3 pages per task. If it's longer, break it into smaller SOPs.

Mistake #3: Not including the why. "Click the green button" is an instruction. "Click the green button — this sends the confirmation to the client within 4 hours, which is our SLA" is an SOP. The why creates understanding.

Mistake #4: Building and forgetting. SOPs without a review cycle decay. Assign an owner. Set a review date. Update when reality changes.

Quick-Start Checklist

- ✓ ☐ Read the full white paper
 - ✓ ☐ Identify the most relevant action items for your stage
 - ✓ ☐ Pick the single most impactful first move and implement it this week
 - ✓ ☐ Review progress in your next leadership meeting
-

This is Principle #25 of 50. Part III: The Scale Engine.

Get the book: The 50 Factor by Scott Scully

The Pasta Lesson

There's a scene in the book where Walter takes Ethan to a pasta-making class. The instructor — a woman named Rosa — hands them a recipe and says: "Read it all the way through before you touch anything." They follow the recipe step by step. The pasta comes out perfectly.

Rosa's lesson: "You want to know why it worked? Because you followed the recipe."

SOPs are recipes for your business. They capture the best way to perform a specific repeating task so that anyone trained on them can produce a consistent result. Just like a pasta recipe ensures that the dish comes out the same whether Rosa makes it or Ethan makes it, an SOP ensures that a client onboarding, a quality review, or a proposal submission comes out the same whether your best person does it or your newest hire does it.

Playbooks (Principles #11 and #13) are the cookbook — they describe the role, the rhythm, and the standards. SOPs are the recipes inside the cookbook — they describe exactly how to execute each task.

The Three-Format Approach

The best SOP programs use three formats for every task:

Written document (for detail). The full step-by-step guide with screenshots, the why behind each step, prerequisites, quality checks, and common mistakes. This is the reference document — the one you hand to a new hire on Day 1.

Quick-reference checklist (for daily use). A one-page summary of the steps — no explanations, just the actions in order. This is what the experienced person uses when executing the task to make sure they don't skip a step. Laminate it. Put it on their desk.

Video walkthrough (for visual learners). A 5-10 minute screen recording of a top performer executing the task while narrating what they're doing and why. This is the training asset — the one that new hires watch before they attempt the task for the first time.

Three formats sounds like triple the work. It's not. The written document takes 2-3 hours to build. The checklist takes 15 minutes (it's a condensed version). The video takes 10-15 minutes of recording. Total investment per SOP: 3-4 hours. The return — in ramp time reduction, quality consistency, and institutional knowledge preservation — is measured in hundreds of hours per year.

The SOP Decay Problem

SOPs have a shelf life. Processes evolve. Tools change. Client expectations shift. An SOP that was accurate 12 months ago may be actively misleading today — teaching new hires a process that no longer matches reality.

The fix: every SOP has an owner, a last-updated date, and a review cycle. Client-facing SOPs get reviewed quarterly. Internal SOPs get reviewed annually. If an SOP hasn't been reviewed in 12 months, treat it as suspect — verify before trusting.

The owner (typically the manager of the function) spends approximately 1 hour per week maintaining the SOP library for their function. That's 50 hours per year invested in keeping the recipes current. The alternative — outdated SOPs that teach the wrong thing — costs far more in errors, rework, and client complaints.

The Freedom Paradox

Most people resist SOPs because they associate documentation with bureaucracy. "We're a startup. We move fast. We don't need paperwork."

The reality is the opposite. SOPs create freedom by eliminating decisions that shouldn't require thinking. When the routine is systematized — when the 80% of work that should be done the same way every time is captured in a recipe — your team's mental energy goes to the 20% that requires creativity, judgment, and innovation.

The chef who has mastered the recipe doesn't think about measurements. They think about flavor. The account manager who has mastered the onboarding SOP doesn't think about what step comes next. They think about how to build the relationship. SOPs handle the mechanics so your people can focus on the magic.

Where to Start: The Priority Order

Don't try to document everything at once. Start with the functions closest to the client and the tasks with the highest volume:

Priority 1: Client-facing functions. Delivery, client services, sales. These are where inconsistency is most visible to clients — and where quality inconsistency most directly damages retention and revenue.

Priority 2: Top 5 highest-impact tasks per function. The tasks that happen most frequently and have the most impact on outcomes. For a sales team, that might be: discovery calls, proposal creation, CRM updates, handoff to delivery, and follow-up cadence. For client services: QBR prep, issue escalation, expansion conversations, renewal process, and onboarding handoff.

Priority 3: Everything else. Operations, marketing, HR, finance. Long-tail SOPs for admin processes and edge cases build out over 12-18 months. Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the started.

Quick-Start Checklist

- ✓ ☐ Pick one function this week (start client-facing)
- ✓ ☐ List every repeating task (8-15 per function)
- ✓ ☐ Select the top 5 by impact and frequency
- ✓ ☐ Sit with the best performer — document the first SOP this week
- ✓ ☐ Test with a novice — fix every gap they find
- ✓ ☐ Build all three formats: written doc, quick-reference checklist, video walkthrough
- ✓ ☐ Assign an SOP owner per function (~1 hour/week maintenance)

- ✓ ☐ Set review cycles: quarterly for client-facing, annually for internal
 - ✓ ☐ Build the central SOP library — organized by function, searchable, version-controlled
-

Implementation Tools

Ready-to-use templates for this Growth Factor

- PDF** **SOP Build Guide**
Three-step process with examples
- XLSX** **SOP Library Index**
Columns: Function, Task, SOP Owner, Version, Last Updated, Review Due, +1 more
- PDF** **SOP Template**
Step-by-step format with quality check and common mistakes
- PDF** **Quick-Reference Checklist Template**
One-page condensed version
- XLSX** **SOP Review Schedule**
Columns: Function, Task, SOP Owner, Version, Last Updated, Review Due, +1 more

The Clone Question Applied to SOPs

The Clone Question from Principle #5 works perfectly for SOP development: "If I cloned your best performer and gave the clone no instructions, what would the clone need to know to produce at the same level?"

The answer to that question — captured step by step, with screenshots and the why behind each step — is the SOP. The best SOPs are co-authored: the top performer narrates while the documenter writes. The top performer catches the steps they do automatically ("oh, I always check the client's timezone before scheduling — I forgot to mention that"). The documenter catches the assumptions the performer makes without realizing ("you said 'open the report' — which report, where is it, how do I access it?").

This co-authoring process takes 2-3 hours per SOP. The result is a document that a novice can follow successfully on their first attempt — which is the definition of a complete SOP.

The SOP library is the institutional memory of your company. When your best performer leaves — and eventually they will — their knowledge survives in the SOPs they helped create. The next person in the role doesn't start from scratch. They start from the documented best practice, refined through testing, and proven through use. That's the difference between a company that stumbles when someone leaves and a company that barely notices.

The Pasta Lesson

There's a scene in the book where a founder and his mentor attend a pasta-making class. The instructor hands them a recipe and says: "Read it all the way through before you touch anything." They follow the recipe step by step. The pasta comes out perfectly.

The instructor's lesson: "You want to know why it worked? Because you followed the recipe."

SOPs are recipes for your business. The pasta recipe ensures that the dish comes out the same whether the instructor makes it or a first-timer makes it. An SOP ensures that a client onboarding, a quality review, or a proposal submission comes out the same whether

your best person does it or your newest hire does it. Consistency through documentation — not through talent, not through osmosis, not through "just watch what I do."

The companies that grow past \$15M all have one thing in common: they stopped relying on individual talent to produce consistent results and started relying on documented systems. The SOP library is how institutional knowledge becomes institutional capability.