FLOCKS Framework

Idea In Short

Most investor frameworks focus on markets, traction, and business models. They scrutinize total addressable market, growth curves, and competitive moats. HubSpot co-founder and Sequoia Capital CEO coach Brian Halligan reverses the lens. He evaluates the person first, then everything else. His mental model for doing that, the FLOCKS Framework, distills six traits he believes predict whether a founder can build something durable. The practical recommendation is clear: before debating valuations or expansion plans, run founders—and yourself—through FLOCKS. Look for first-principles thinking that questions industry assumptions rather than copying competitors. Notice whether a leader is genuinely lovable in the sense of attracting missionaries rather than mercenaries. Assess whether their relationship to the problem is closer to obsession than enthusiasm, whether they demonstrate courage in polarizing bets, whether their domain knowledge is deep yet complemented by diverse perspectives, and whether they remain students of the game over time. For investors, boards, and founders themselves, FLOCKS shifts the central question from Is this market attractive? to Is this person built to go the distance? Using this framework as a filter forces uncomfortable but essential introspection about where a leader needs to grow, and helps decision-makers distinguish between short-term momentum and the ingredients required to build enduring companies.

Most investment frameworks begin with the market. They examine addressable market size, competitive dynamics, growth metrics, and margins. Halligan approaches the question differently: he asks first whether the founder is capable of building a durable business over a long horizon. As HubSpot's co-founder and Sequoia's in-house CEO coach, he has seen that early-stage data can be noisy and markets can shift, but the founder's underlying traits tend to persist and shape every subsequent decision.

FLOCKS therefore centers the evaluation on the individual rather than the deck. It deliberately ignores much of what pitch documents try to emphasize—slides on market size, hockey-stick charts, and lists of competitors. Instead, it asks whether the person at the

center of the story thinks from first principles, can attract and retain missionary talent, sustains obsession over years, takes courageous positions when the market disagrees, combines deep expertise with diverse input, and keeps learning like a student of the game.

This emphasis does not dismiss market analysis. It complements it by treating the founder's traits as the lens through which every strategic choice will be filtered. If that lens is strong, the founder is more likely to respond intelligently to changing conditions. If it is weak, even a promising market can be squandered.

Overview of the FLOCKS Framework

FLOCKS is an acronym that captures six traits Halligan uses to decide whether to work closely with a founder: First-principles thinking, Lovable, Obsessed, Courageous, Knowledgeable, and Student. Each trait is grounded in historical examples and patterns observed across founders who built enduring businesses, including musicians like Jerry Garcia and business leaders such as Jeff Bezos.

The framework is intentionally compact so leaders and investors can keep it in mind during conversations and pattern recognition. Rather than serving as a scorecard with rigid thresholds, FLOCKS functions as a set of lenses. A founder may show strong manifestations of some traits and weaker expressions of others, and the combination matters more than any single dimension.

Halligan's key insight is that the founders most likely to build durable companies often look unconventional through traditional filters. They question industry norms, attract unusually committed followings, display long-term obsession with their problem, and hold contrarian convictions that the market initially rejects. FLOCKS provides vocabulary and structure for noticing those traits systematically.

First-principles thinking

The F in FLOCKS stands for First-principles thinking. Great founders do not primarily look at what competitors are doing and iterate. They strip assumptions down to their base elements and ask whether the system itself needs to be rebuilt. Halligan illustrates this through Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead, who ignored the standard music industry rules and invented new ways for a band to operate, distribute music, and cultivate an audience.

First-principles founders ask questions such as why a business model must follow the existing pattern, why a product has to be packaged in a familiar way, or why a distribution strategy cannot be reinvented. This style of reasoning challenges taken-for-granted constraints and often leads to novel combinations of ideas that incumbents miss. In technology and media, where platforms and behaviors change quickly, this trait becomes especially powerful.

The practical prompt Halligan suggests is direct: Why does this have to work the way everyone assumes it does?. Founders who take that question seriously are more likely to design companies that are not simple copies of what already exists, but new configurations that can differentiate meaningfully.

Lovable: attracting missionaries, not mercenaries

The L in FLOCKS stands for Lovable, but not in the superficial sense of being well-liked. Halligan uses the term to describe founders who are genuinely magnetic—leaders who attract customers who evangelize, employees who willingly follow through pivots, and investors who extend trust before metrics fully justify it. Lovable founders build communities around their ideas rather than relying solely on transactional persuasion.

The Grateful Dead provide a vivid example. The band did not run conventional marketing campaigns. Instead, they cultivated one of the most devoted fan bases in music history through authentic connection, shared experiences, and a sense of belonging. In the business context, lovable founders build similar depth of relationship with early customers and team members.

This trait matters because it reduces the need to hard sell every decision. When stakeholders feel a genuine connection to a founder’s mission and character, they are more likely to stick through tough phases, advocate for the product, and provide honest feedback. In early-stage companies where volatility is high, this reservoir of goodwill can be the difference between survival and stagnation.

Obsessed rather than merely passionate

The O in FLOCKS stands for Obsessed. Halligan draws a sharp distinction between passion, which can be intense but intermittent, and obsession, which manifests as a compulsion to

keep working on the problem even when conditions are unfavorable. Jerry Garcia practicing guitar in the bathroom and Jeff Bezos insisting on a customer-first, long-term path in the face of pressure for short-term profits illustrate this difference.

Obsession shows up in behaviors such as continuous experimentation, relentless refinement of a product or system, and persistent engagement with customers or users even when there is little external recognition. It is what sustains a mission during periods when markets do not cooperate, funding is scarce, or metrics plateau.

Halligan looks for founders who feel compelled to pursue their vision rather than merely motivated. Motivation can fade when circumstances become difficult. Compulsion, by contrast, tends to survive shocks and create the resilience needed to carry a company through years of iteration and resistance.

Courageous: embracing polarizing bets

The C in FLOCKS stands for Courageous. Courage in this context is not about generic risk-taking. It is about holding a conviction the market believes is wrong and acting on it anyway, when the logic and evidence suggest that the contrarian position is justified. The Grateful Dead's decision to invest millions in the Wall of Sound—a custom speaker system so ambitious it nearly bankrupted the band—is one example. No other band would have attempted it at the time.

In business, Halligan points to HubSpot's early bet on inbound marketing, which was polarizing when introduced. Many incumbents dismissed the idea that educational content and pull-based strategies could reshape demand generation. That polarization was a signal. As Halligan notes, You're onto a good idea if it's a little bit polarizing.. If everyone immediately agrees with a strategy, it is often incremental rather than transformative.

Courageous founders are willing to endure skepticism in pursuit of a thesis that challenges prevailing wisdom. They do not seek controversy for its own sake, but they also do not retreat simply because consensus is absent. This trait is particularly critical in categories where success requires changing entrenched behavior or norms.

Knowledgeable and spiky in expertise

The K in FLOCKS stands for Knowledgeable. Halligan emphasizes deep domain expertise, but with an important qualifier: it must be paired with the self-awareness to recognize its limits and with a deliberate effort to surround oneself with complementary strengths. Garcia's decision to play with musicians from bluegrass, jazz, blues, and country backgrounds created friction that was essential to the band's distinctive sound.

Halligan advises founders to build spiky teams—groups composed of people who are exceptional in different domains rather than replicas of the founder's profile. The natural temptation is to hire people who think and operate similarly, which can be comfortable but limits innovation. Diversity in expertise and perspective introduces tension that, when managed well, produces better ideas and more robust decisions.

Knowledgeable founders therefore do two things. They invest in their own understanding of the problem space, customer behavior, and relevant technologies. At the same time, they seek out partners and team members who challenge their assumptions and bring different tools to the table. That combination helps avoid blind spots and improves the quality of strategic choices.

Student: being a student of the game

The S in FLOCKS stands for Student, the trait Halligan added when he expanded the framework from FLOCK to FLOCKS. He describes the best founders as students of the game, meaning they are not just curious but deeply and continuously curious. They study history, learn from peers, and examine their own failures for insight.

Halligan compares these leaders to large language models [LLMs]: constantly ingesting information and constantly updating their internal models. The strongest founders do not limit their learning to what is immediately in front of them. They look back decades to understand why industries behave as they do, how prior waves of innovation played out, and which patterns repeated across cycles.

Being a student of the game influences decisions in subtle ways. It allows founders to recognize when they are replaying old mistakes at a new scale, to anticipate how markets may respond to certain moves, and to adapt playbooks from adjacent domains. This trait is vital in environments where the rules are still forming and where learning speed can be a decisive advantage.

FLOCKS as a founder evaluation tool

The FLOCKS Framework is useful precisely because it ignores many of the elements most pitch decks highlight. It does not focus on spreadsheet curves or detailed competitive analyses in the first instance. Instead, it asks a simpler, harder question: Is this person built to go the distance?. That question reframes evaluation from a static snapshot to a dynamic view of how a founder will behave over years.

For investors and advisors, FLOCKS can be applied in conversations, due diligence, and ongoing coaching. It encourages pointed questions about how a founder reasons, what kind of community they build, how they respond to setbacks, and how they choose team members. Over time, these observations create a richer profile than traditional due diligence alone.

The framework also serves as a self-assessment tool. Halligan ends his description with a challenge: if you ran yourself honestly through FLOCKS, which letter would receive the lowest score?. That discomfort is intentional. It invites founders and leaders to identify their weakest trait as the next area for deliberate development, whether through mentorship, practice, or changes in how they structure their work.

Applying FLOCKS in practice

Using FLOCKS effectively requires translating the six traits into concrete questions and scenarios. For First-principles thinking, investors might ask how a founder would redesign the industry if starting from scratch. For Lovable, they may look at how early customers talk about the founder and whether employees describe a sense of mission. For Obsession, they can observe how the founder behaves when critical milestones slip or when external validation is absent.

Courageous decisions can be assessed by examining past choices that went against consensus and understanding how the founder handled criticism. Knowledge can be evaluated through conversations about the market, competitors, and underlying technologies, as well as through the composition of the team. The Student trait might be explored by asking what books, histories, or failures the founder has studied and how those learnings inform current strategy.

In portfolio reviews and board meetings, FLOCKS can sharpen discussions about leadership development and succession. Rather than focusing solely on performance metrics, boards can consider whether a founder's trait profile is evolving in a way that supports long-term scale. When a leader is strong in some traits but noticeably weaker in others, FLOCKS helps identify where coaching, hiring, or governance adjustments can provide leverage.

Summary

The FLOCKS Framework is deliberately simple, but it is not simplistic. Each trait—First-principles thinking, Lovable, Obsessed, Courageous, Knowledgeable, Student—describes a pattern of behavior, not a personality label. Collectively, they form a practical rubric for assessing whether a founder can sustain a mission through the volatility, resistance, and ambiguity that define ambitious company-building. Markets will change, capital cycles will turn, and playbooks will age, yet founders who score strongly across FLOCKS tend to stay adaptable, compelling, and decisive. For investors and boards, FLOCKS offers a way to evaluate leaders beyond pitch decks and dashboards. It helps distinguish between charisma that dazzles in a meeting and character that persists under pressure. For founders, it provides a mirror. Running yourself honestly through FLOCKS reveals where your strengths already support durable leadership and where deliberate development is needed—whether in deepening domain expertise, cultivating more courageous bets, or embracing the mindset of a long-term student. Ultimately, FLOCKS does not replace quantitative analysis or structural diligence. It complements them by focusing attention on the human engine behind every strategy. When decision-makers ask not only whether a business can work, but whether this specific person is likely to build something enduring, they make sharper bets and give founders more targeted support. The framework's final, uncomfortable prompt—identifying the letter where you would give yourself the lowest score—is where its real value begins.