THE FOUR-DAY RESPONSE TIME

Real Operating Decisions. Real Capability Failures. Real Business Outcomes.
An Executive Case Study in The O'Brien Method Series

COMPANY PROFILE

Industry: Transportation and logistics: freight brokerage

Approximate revenue: $30–35 million

Business model: B2B freight brokerage; high inbound shipper-inquiry volume, thin per-load margins

Growth stage: Scaling sales floor; headcount roughly doubled over the preceding year

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

New shipper inquiries were taking an average of four days to receive a first quote, in a market where shippers typically solicit quotes from three or four brokers simultaneously and award the load to whoever responds first with a workable rate. Leadership's instinct was to add headcount, assuming the reps were simply overwhelmed. A diagnostic mapped the handoff chain and found the delay had almost nothing to do with rep effort. It was a structural bottleneck: a compliance-driven credit and onboarding check ran serially ahead of quoting, and no one owned the shared inbox where inquiries piled up after the first hour or two of the day.

THE SITUATION

The company had quickly scaled its sales floor to capture growing inbound volume, and leadership had reasonably assumed that more reps would mean faster response times. However, response times had not improved in proportion, and in some weeks, they worsened even as headcount grew, which leadership found difficult to explain and initially attributed to onboarding drag from the newer hires.

THE INVESTIGATION

The diagnostic traced a sample of inbound inquiries from first contact to first quote, timestamping every handoff in between. The pattern was consistent regardless of which rep eventually handled the load. An inquiry arrived in a shared inbox, sat until someone happened to open it, was informally assigned to whichever rep noticed it first, and then routed through a credit and onboarding check required by company policy before any quote could be issued. That check ran as a separate serial step rather than in parallel with the quoting conversation.

No single person owned the shared inbox after the first hour or two of the business day. Inquiries that arrived in the afternoon, or outside a rep's active attention, could sit unnoticed for a full business day or longer before anyone picked them up, and the credit-check step then added further time to that delay.

ROOT CAUSE

The root cause was a structural bottleneck in the handoff chain, not a rep capacity or effort problem: an unowned intake queue and a serial compliance step that should have run in parallel with initial quoting. Adding headcount addressed a constraint that did not actually exist, while leaving the real constraint, the handoff design itself, untouched.

THE INTERVENTION

Credit and onboarding checks were redesigned to run in parallel with an initial conditional quote rather than as a gate ahead of it, allowing a shipper to receive a workable rate immediately while the account was formalized in the background. Explicit ownership of the intake queue was assigned, with rotating on-call coverage ensuring every inquiry had a named owner within minutes of arrival, rather than whoever happened to notice it. A visible SLA dashboard tracking time-to-first-quote was installed for the full team, replacing the previous lack of shared accountability for the metric that mattered most to win rate.

BUSINESS RESULTS

Median time-to-first quote dropped from four days to under four hours within the first month of the redesign. Win rate on inbound shipper inquiries rose accordingly, and the volume of quotes each rep could handle increased without further headcount additions because the constraint was structural rather than a function of the number of people available to work it.

THE O'BRIEN METHOD INSIGHT

A speed-to-lead failure is usually a structural failure in the handoff chain, not a motivation or capacity problem with the rep at the end. Adding headcount to a broken handoff design produces more people waiting at the same bottleneck, not a faster response. Trace the actual path a lead travels before assuming more hands will fix a structural delay.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR CEOS

- Before adding headcount to fix slow response times, map the actual handoff chain a lead travels through. The bottleneck is often a step no rep controls.
- Compliance and onboarding checks that run serially ahead of a customer-facing response can usually be redesigned to run in parallel without compromising the checks themselves.
- An intake queue with no named owner will always produce inconsistent response times, regardless of how large or capable the team behind it is.
- Track time-to-first response as a visible, shared team metric, not an individual rep’s statistic. The failure is often systemic, and the fix has to be, too.
- More people working within a broken process produces a bigger version of the same problem, not a solution to it.