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When One Person Becomes the System: A Reflection from Port Elizabeth

In Port Elizabeth, South Africa, our cohort spent time volunteering in a local township. It was there that I met a woman the community simply called "mama." She worked out of a modest kitchen — no formal infrastructure, no visible institutional support. Just a steady rhythm of preparation and care. Each day, children gathered, and she fed them — consistently, quietly, without interruption. For some, it was the only reliable meal they would receive.

What stood out was not just the scale of her effort, but the steadiness of her presence. When she spoke, there was no trace of urgency or resentment. She shared, almost matter-of-factly, that she received no government assistance. No external funding. No formal backing. And yet, the work continued. This led me to wonder:

> What leads someone to become "the one" who steps forward when systems fall short?

ANALYSIS

The Pattern Beneath the Moment

At first glance, this can be framed as individual generosity. But that interpretation is incomplete. What I witnessed reflects a broader pattern often studied within sociology and development contexts: when formal systems fail to meet basic needs, informal systems emerge. Individuals, families, and community members step into roles that institutions were designed but unable to fulfill. This is not simply altruism. It is an adaptive response.

The Invisible Labor Gap

In many under-resourced environments, survival depends on distributed responsibility. Care is not centralized — it is carried, often unevenly, by those willing or able to hold it. The risk is that these individuals become invisible extensions of the system itself. Their labor fills the gap so consistently that the absence of formal support becomes normalized. Over time, what began as an act of care can become an unspoken expectation.

Rethinking Responsibility

There is a tendency, particularly in leadership spaces, to celebrate individuals like "mama" as exceptional. And in many ways, they are. But there is also a quiet tension in that framing. When we position individuals as extraordinary, we can unintentionally remove pressure from the systems that necessitate their existence.

Two Questions

The framing matters. Consider the difference:

- **Question One:** Why does the system not provide?
- **Question Two:** How inspiring that someone stepped in.

Both can be true. But only one addresses the root condition. Leadership requires holding both — and choosing which to act on.

ORGANIZATIONAL LENS

What This Reveals About Leadership

This dynamic shows up far beyond townships. In organizations, there is often a "mama" — the person who absorbs what the structure fails to hold. Recognizing this pattern is one of the most important acts of organizational self-awareness a leader can perform.

The Emotional Labor Carrier

They absorb emotional labor no one else names — the weight of unprocessed tension, interpersonal friction, and unspoken team dynamics. Their capacity becomes the de facto container for the organization's relational health.

The Continuity Keeper

They ensure continuity when processes break down. When systems fail or transitions create uncertainty, they step in — reliably, consistently — often without being asked and rarely with formal authority.

The Leadership Gap Filler

They step in when leadership is absent or unclear. Decisions get made, teams stay moving, and crises get contained — because this person chooses to hold the line regardless of title or mandate.

They are reliable. Trusted. Often deeply valued. And often unsupported. Over time, the system begins to rely on their consistency rather than addressing the gaps that require it. **What looks like strength at the individual level can signal fragility at the structural level.**

⚠ The instinct is to celebrate the individual. That recognition matters. But the deeper work is to pause and ask: What conditions made this level of individual intervention necessary? And what would it take to ensure that care, responsibility, and support are not dependent on one person's capacity to carry them?

PRACTICAL REFLECTION

Pausing the Pattern — A Practical Shift

For leaders and institutions, this reflection invites a different kind of attention. The goal is not to replace people like "mama." It is to ensure that the system does not depend on them to function. That distinction — between honoring individual contribution and building structural capacity — is where real organizational change begins.

01

Identify Where Care Is Informally Held

Map the places in your organization where critical work — emotional, operational, relational — is being carried by individuals rather than supported by structure. Name it clearly before trying to change it.

02

Distinguish Resilience from Over-Reliance

Not all informal adaptation is a problem. Some is genuine resilience. The question is whether the reliance has become so embedded that the system cannot function without that specific person — and whether that person has consented to carry it.

03

Build Systems That Distribute Responsibility

Design roles, processes, and accountability structures that spread responsibility without diluting it. Shared ownership requires intentional architecture — it does not emerge by default.

> In that kitchen, the work was immediate. Necessary. Life-sustaining. But it also pointed to something larger. When one person becomes the system, it reveals both the strength of human care and the limits of the structures meant to support it. The question is not whether individuals will continue to step forward. They will. The question is whether the systems around them will evolve so they no longer have to carry it alone.

Take the next step. Pause the pattern. Choose one place this dynamic exists, examine what sustains it, and take a deliberate step to change it — by design. If you're navigating this in your organization, you can learn more or schedule a consultation at Lowe Insights.