

The Cost of Being the Only One Who Can Do It

By Bryce Thomason · August 19, 2026 · 4 min read



For most of my first three years as an executive director, I was also still running the company I had built before it. Two organizations, two sets of people, two inboxes that never emptied. I had told myself it was just a transition, and on paper it was. Underneath the logistics sat something I did not want to look at directly. I could not picture either place working without me in it. They both needed me.

My first day as executive director was April 1, 2020. I took the job to help a congregation I care deeply about through what was about to become the pandemic. Within weeks the world turned over, and I was scared. Scared for my own life, for the people I love, for the members that congregation served, and for the people who worked for me, some of them with me since 1997. Everyone was struggling. By hell or high water, I was going to show up and do whatever I could to get us all through it.

There is no single moment I can point to when I understood how much was resting on me, because it never let up. On one side, a congregation already deep in a season of change. On the other, people who had stayed through every version that business took, more than twenty years for some of them, building families and livelihoods around it, with no way to know whether anyone would be buying anything by summer. I felt like I had to figure all of it out. So I put myself in every driver's seat I could reach.

That is a flattering story to tell yourself. It sure sounds like commitment.

What I had done, without ever deciding to, was make myself load-bearing. That is a lot of weight to carry.

In a building, a load-bearing wall is the one you cannot take out. Everything above it rests there. You can paint it, hang things on it, renovate the rooms around it, but remove it and the ceiling comes with it. Leaders become load-bearing the same way, not by design but by accumulation. You answer the question because you already know the answer. You take the call because you have the history. You write the draft yourself because it is faster than explaining. Every one of those is a reasonable decision on its own. Together, over a few years, they build a structure that stands only because you are standing in it.

The exhaustion is real, but the exhaustion is not the main cost.

What is the indispensability trap in leadership?

The indispensability trap is the pattern where a leader's constant stepping in quietly trains a team to stop developing. Each rescue feels generous in the moment. Over time it concentrates knowledge, judgment, and decisions in one person, leaving the leader depleted and the team capable of less than it should be.

Here is the part that took me longest to accept. Every time I stepped in, I was teaching someone that they did not have to. Not once. Repeatedly, patiently, over years, with the best intentions I had. People learn what we practice, not what we say. I said I wanted a team that could carry the work. I practiced something else entirely.

You can see the results if you look for them. Capable people go quiet in meetings, because they have learned the decision will be made somewhere else. Questions route around the person who should own them and land on your desk instead. Work slows when you are out, and everyone treats that as evidence of how important you are, when it is really evidence of how narrow the structure has become. The organization has not grown a bench. It has grown a dependency, and it calls that dependency leadership.

There is a personal cost too, and it is quieter. Being needed is a real pleasure. It can substitute for a long time for being known. When your worth in a place is measured by how much of it would stop without you, rest becomes threatening rather than restorative, because rest is the one thing that tests the story.

None of this makes you a bad leader. It usually makes you a competent one who has never been given a reason to stop.

Here is a small practice I often share in coaching. The next time you are about to step in, pause before you do and ask yourself one question:

Am I the only one who can do this, or am I the only one who has ever been allowed to?

Sit with it long enough to get an honest answer, because the honest answer is usually the second one. Then ask the follow-up. Who would need to know what I know for this to stop being true, and what is the smallest piece of it I could hand them this week?

Not the whole wall. A piece. Distributing a load is slow structural work, and it looks, at first, like things getting worse. The handoff takes longer than doing it yourself. The first attempt is not how you would have done it. That discomfort is not a sign the practice is failing. It is the sound of weight moving off a single point and onto a structure that can hold it.

Six years on, I am still catching myself reaching for the wheel. The practice is not to stop caring. It is to notice the habit while it is happening, rather than three years later, and to choose differently in the moment I actually have.

So a few questions worth sitting with.

Where in your work are you the single point of failure, and how long has that been true?

Who on your team has stopped offering, and when did they stop?

What would have to be true for you to take two consecutive weeks away without a phone?

If you have been carrying more than your share and quietly proud of it, consider this a gentle invitation rather than a critique. Being the only one who can do it is not a measure of how much you matter. It is a measure of how much the structure has narrowed around you.

The most generous thing many of us can do is become removable. Not absent. Not disengaged. Removable, in the way a well-built structure is: still holding weight, no longer the only thing holding it.