HOPE SPRINGS AFRICA

HSA FIELD NOTES

The Difference Between Being Needed and Being Useful

A conversation about service, leadership, and the freedom to help without becoming indispensable

For leaders, churches, nonprofits, and people who want their contribution to strengthen what can continue without them.



Being needed can feel meaningful.

Being useful asks a harder question: what becomes stronger because you were there?

Most of us do not enter service hoping to become indispensable. We want to help. We want our time to matter, our gifts to be useful, and our presence to make something better.

But over time, being helpful can begin to feel a lot like being needed. People call us. Decisions wait for us. Problems come back to us. And if we are not careful, dependence can start masquerading as impact.

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THE FEELING OF BEING NEEDED

It can feel like proof that the work matters.

Something deeply affirming is knowing people count on you. A leader asks your opinion. A team waits for your direction. A community calls when something goes wrong. A project seems to move because you are pushing it forward.

None of that is automatically unhealthy. Responsibility is real. Leadership is real. Sometimes people should be able to depend on us.

The question is what happens if we are always the answer.

Maybe you have felt this.

You step away for a few days, and everything seems to pause. No one makes the decision. No one wants to take the risk. The work is technically functioning, but only because one person keeps carrying the center.

That can look like strong leadership from the outside. Inside, it may signal that the people around us haven't been given enough room to grow.

If everything depends on you, you may be carrying more than leadership.

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USEFUL IS DIFFERENT

Useful leadership leaves capacity behind.

Being useful does not mean disappearing. It means contributing in a way that strengthens other people rather than quietly replacing them.

A useful leader teaches what they know. Shares context. Lets someone else make the call. Allows a younger leader to try, adjust, and try again. Builds systems people can understand. Opens doors and then steps aside far enough for someone else to walk through them.

That kind of leadership can feel slower because it often involves watching someone do something differently than you would.

This is where control gets tested.

It is usually faster to do the task yourself. It may even be easier to fix the problem quietly. But efficiency today can cost capacity tomorrow if no one else learns how to carry the work.

Useful leadership does not ask, “How much can I carry?”
It asks, “What can I help someone else learn to carry?”

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TRUST

Sometimes development looks like letting someone try.

Trust is easy to praise and much harder to practice.

When we say we want people to lead, eventually we have to give them something real enough to lead.

That means responsibility. Decisions. Follow-through. Consequences. Feedback. And yes, sometimes mistakes.

Think about the first time someone trusted you.

Most of us did not become capable because someone waited until we were flawless. We grew because someone believed we could carry more, gave us a chance, and stayed close enough to help us learn.

We see this again and again in leadership development: confidence often follows responsibility, not the other way around.

People often grow into the weight they are trusted to carry.

Scripture reminds us that gifts are meant to serve others, not simply to remain concentrated in one person (1 Peter 4:10). Healthy leadership makes room for those gifts to emerge.

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WHAT HEALTHY SUPPORT CAN LOOK LIKE

Stay close without standing in the center.

We sometimes make a false choice in service: either we control everything, or we abandon people to figure it out alone.

But good development often lives in the middle.

We can coach without taking over. Ask questions without making every decision. Offer resources without owning the outcome. Stay available without becoming the only source of wisdom.

Picture the difference.

One leader solves every problem brought to them. Another asks, “What do you think we should do?” Both may care deeply. Only one is consistently creating room for someone else to think, decide, and grow.

Support is not the same thing as control.

Sometimes the most helpful thing we can do is remain close enough to encourage someone while resisting the urge to reclaim the work the moment it becomes uncomfortable.

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THE GOAL

Success is not being needed forever.

This can be difficult to say in sectors built around service, because being needed can feel like evidence of importance.

But if our work is truly about people, then their growth should matter more than our centrality.

A healthy organization should be able to celebrate when someone no longer needs the same level of support. A healthy leader should be able to rejoice when another person can make the decision, lead the meeting, solve the problem, teach the lesson, or carry the relationship.

The best evidence of leadership may be what continues when you are no longer in the room.

At HSA, this is why we keep returning to local leadership. We are not trying to build work that becomes more dependent on us every year. We want people to become more capable, more trusted, more connected, and better able to carry what belongs in their hands.

That does not make our role meaningless. It makes the role mature.

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A FEW QUESTIONS TO SIT WITH

What is growing around your leadership?

If this topic makes you slightly uncomfortable, that may be worth paying attention to. Most of us have places where our usefulness and our identity have become a little tangled.

- If I stepped away for a season, what would continue well?
- What decisions are people still bringing to me that they may be ready to make themselves?
- Am I sharing enough context for others to lead wisely?
- Do I create room for people to make mistakes without losing my trust?
- Is my support building confidence—or creating dependence?
- Where could I coach instead of control?
- Who around me is ready to carry more than I have allowed them to carry?

Do not measure your impact only by how often people call your name.

Look at what they can carry because you were willing to equip, trust, and release.

What is one thing you want to carry forward from this Field Note?

If your church, nonprofit, team, or organization is thinking about leadership development, succession, local ownership, or building work that lasts, HSA would be glad to continue the conversation.

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