



THE C-SUITE

with
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Sustainable Business: Who builds the systems?

Just like Rome, systems are not built in one day. Systems are also emergent, and usually they emerge from the actions of a visionary leader. In simple language, systems are the visible traditions and cultures of business organisations.

On Philosophy, Socrates said, "it begins when one learns to doubt – particularly to doubt one's cherished beliefs, one's dogmas and one's axioms... There is no real philosophy until the mind turns round and examines itself."

Systems was one of my cherished beliefs, I grew up on it, and I came to adopt it as a given. That the reason Ugandan businesses did not live to see another generation was a failure to build systems. That the reason the potholes in this country take ages to be noticed, and another generation to be fixed was systems. And my echo-chambers reiterated these arguments, and together, we went into a confirmation-bias cycle.

The people who showed up on business panels would confirm our beliefs – it all came down to systems. And around that same time, it also became popular to be a systems thinker. Systems became the alpha and omega of sustainable business. Then came my moment in Damascus when I started asking these rooms – "how do we build systems? What is the first step? Who takes that first step?"

And whenever I asked, the rooms would go silent. Mind you, these were rooms filled with Senior Executives, those who had successfully climbed the corporate ladders. The one question they could not answer is how does one build systems from

scratch. How do you find the most chaotic scene and translate it into world class order?

The slow-grind of building systems

Just like Rome, systems are not built in one day. Systems are also emergent, and usually they emerge from the actions of a visionary leader. Experience has now taught me that systems start with a strong personality, that finds a way to clone themselves, and in this process, systems form to espouse the things they hold sacrosanctly.

That is to say, if a leader requires certain information in the early morning, the subordinates will start to build around this. As a result, they come up with reports in a format that will suit this leader's desires. And as the leader sustains this momentum, new employees come in, adopt these reports without having an idea of how the systems came to be.

In simple language, systems are the visible traditions and cultures of business organisations. And these traditions often follow from the value systems of the founder. You can never separate the emergent system from the values of the founder or visionary of the business.

However, I am heading somewhere with this train of thought. I am heading to the slow grind of the founder as they build piece by piece,

BUILDING SYSTEMS

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as they handle through the frustration of trying to communicate their mind to everyone. The founder follows up on a daily, they string the different pieces together, because the number one hobby of the employee is to slack off. The founder sets this pace, they become the heartbeat of the organisation. And by sustaining this tension, through a myriad of actions, decisions, systems emerge to keep up with the founder's pace and requirements.

But this process of building systems is akin to trench warfare. It is leadership from the trenches. It is about this leader who is never afraid of rolling up their sleeves and following up diligently on issues (that manager CEOs consider to be non-strategic). The founder/visionary recognises that strategy starts from the small things, from leaving nothing to chance.

A business mentor loves to remind me – "you will be shocked that big things are masked by the small things." And this is one thing that experienced auditors will tell you. It is always the small things that lead you to the big things. It is the one glitch in a report that will expose years and years of rot.

And this process never ends, it is continuous, you have to keep emphasising and repeating these things to the employees, at every available chance. And when this act is sustained over time, employees will rise

to the occasion and form systems (usually to keep in pace with the visionary). That is why systems are an emergent feature. They do not fall from the Heavens, somebody triggers the process of their formation.

Important to know that systems cannot be imported. They must be localised and contextualised. It is one thing to talk about the Japanese and their Kaizen, it is another thing altogether to translate it into the Ugandan experience, and find a language for it, and a means to get everyone buy into it.

And thus, I now believe, you cannot have great systems until you have great leaders. It is strong leaders that build strong systems. Because to break the inertia of the past, but to also set into motion, the stream the future. And when you start seeing this, you cannot 'unsee' it.

Lest we forget, this process of building systems is slow, it has many peaks, reversals, frustrations, hold-ups, sometimes gets entangled, but I have the strong leaders to see through these moments, great systems always emerge.

There is always a strong Patriarch or Matriarch that sets the process in motion. And this should set the stage for my next piece – why family business is the future in Uganda.

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