

The Tulsi in the Courtyard.

A governance lesson in human-capital depletion, and why every organization needs a policy for its most-borrowed resource: its people.

In many households, a tulsi plant stands sentinel in the courtyard, a small shrub entrusted with an outsized job. Whenever someone fell ill, the family plucked a few of its leaves, brewed them into a syrup, and the fever broke. It worked, reliably, and it never took more than five leaves at a time. Neighbors noticed. Understandably, they began helping themselves too. Five leaves became fifteen, then fifty, drawn from every direction by people who each, individually, took only what they needed. No single visit killed the plant. The accumulation did. One day, the tulsi that had quietly healed an entire neighborhood simply died, not from any one cause, but from the ordinary arithmetic of something that worked, for too many people, for too long, with nobody tracking the withdrawals.

It is tempting to read this as a story about self-care, and at the individual level it is exactly that: look after yourself, because no one else is keeping count of what you give away. But sit with the story a little longer and it becomes something more precise, a description of an under-governed resource with unlimited access and no depletion metric. Replace tulsi plant with your most capable employee, “the one compliance officer who understands the legacy system,” or “the colleague who alone remembers why a clause was drafted a certain way,” and the parable stops being folklore. It becomes a description of an organizational design failure that HR, governance, and risk functions encounter constantly, and rarely name correctly.

A resource that heals everyone and belongs to no one has exactly one way to end: it runs out.

Key-Person Dependency Is a Governance Failure, Not a Compliment.

Every organization has a tulsi plant. It is usually not named on any risk register. It is celebrated instead. It is the person everyone routes to when a problem is unusual, urgent, or politically delicate. The one whose absence would visibly slow the business down. Being indispensable is treated as a personal virtue, a mark of talent. Rarely is it treated as what it actually is, a single point of failure that the organization has allowed to form by default, because relying on one well of expertise was cheaper, in the short term, than building several.

This is precisely the blind spot that key-person risk frameworks and business-continuity audits are meant to catch, yet in practice they are applied to systems and vendors far more rigorously than to people. A company will meticulously document its failover plan for a server outage while leaving its institutional memory dependent on the goodwill and stamina of two or three individuals who have never been asked how close to empty they are running.

Why Organizations Keep Growing Tulsi Plants.

The pattern recurs because the incentives at each individual point of contact are entirely reasonable. Every request for the expert's time looks small in isolation, “just five leaves,” a quick question, one more favor, a single fire to put out before lunch. No requester experiences themselves as the one who tips the plant into decline, because no one did anything different from the person before them. This is a variant of the tragedy of the commons, except the commons here is not land or water, it is a colleague's attention, expertise, and stamina. A resource that feels free because it is not metered, not because it is unlimited.

It is compounded by a documentation gap. The tulsi's healing power lived only in its leaves, never in a written recipe that could be reproduced elsewhere. Likewise, expert knowledge inside an organization is frequently tacit, undocumented, and inseparable from the one person who holds it. Every request for help draws directly on the living plant because no seedling, cutting, or written formula was ever made from it. Sustainability was never designed in, abundance was simply assumed.

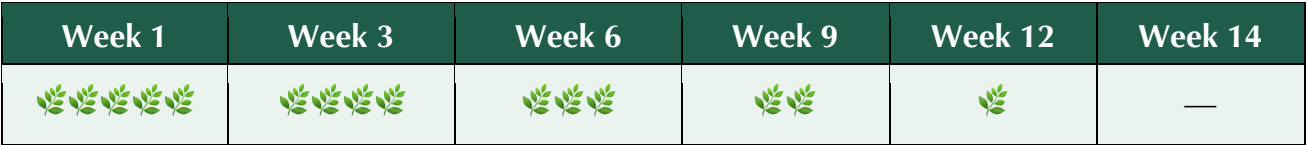


Figure: how a healthy resource is drawn down by demand nobody is measuring.

The Blind Spot: Measure Output, Never Withdrawal.

Most performance and workforce dashboards track what a person produces, not what is continually drawn from them. Few organizations can answer, on demand, how many urgent requests land on their single most relied-upon employee in a given month, how many of those arrive after hours, or how many processes have no documented backup owner. Without that data, decline looks sudden from the outside, a resignation, a burnout leave, a costly error, even though it was accumulating in plain sight for months.

A short list of warning signs is usually visible well before the plant dies. Rising attrition concentrated among top performers rather than average ones, a widening gap between who is formally responsible for a process and who actually executes it from memory, an increasing frequency of “just this once” exceptions routed to the same person, and self-reported exhaustion that gets reframed internally as a test of commitment rather than as a genuine signal.

Folklore to Framework: Five Governance Prescriptions.

- Institutionalize the knowledge:
Convert tacit expertise into documented playbooks, runbooks, and decision logs, so healing does not depend on live leaves alone. Documentation is not bureaucratic overhead, it is the seedling that lets the plant survive its own harvest.
- Meter the demand:

Track requests, escalations, and after-hours contact directed at key individuals the way a compliance function tracks control failures as a leading indicator, not an afterthought discovered at exit interview.

- Rotate access and build redundancy:
Cross-training, shadowing, and deliberate deputization ensure more than one stem can supply leaves, so no single person's calendar is the organization's continuity plan.
- Encode boundaries as policy, not personality:
The right to decline an additional ask should be protected by a written escalation ladder available to everyone, not dependent on how assertive a particular employee happens to be.
- Assign explicit ownership of sustainability itself:
Someone in leadership or governance should be formally accountable for the health of the organization's critical-knowledge resources, in the same way someone is accountable for financial or legal exposure, a designated caretaker, not an assumption that visitors will water the plant on their way to pick its leaves.

Human Capital as a Balance-Sheet Asset.

This is ultimately a fiduciary argument as much as a cultural one. Emerging human-capital reporting standards, such as ISO 30414, exist precisely because boards and regulators have begun to treat workforce sustainability as material information, not a soft metric. A risk register that lists financial, legal, and cybersecurity exposure but omits key-person and burnout risk is an incomplete register. If an organization would never allow its most critical server to run without a documented failover, it should not allow its most critical expertise to run without one either. Governance frameworks that formalize succession planning, workload ceilings, and knowledge-transfer requirements are not indulgences, they are the corporate equivalent of transplanting cuttings before the original plant is depleted.

Water the Plant Before You Need the Syrup.

The closing line of the original story is a plea for self-preservation, remember that you are ultimately on your own, so take care of yourself. That advice is sound, and every professional should heed it. But it places the entire burden of sustainability on the individual leaf-bearer, when the deeper failure was structural, a system that let unlimited, unmeasured demand fall on one unprotected source. Boundaries set by individuals matter, but they only hold at scale when an organization codifies them in policy, in documentation, in workload metrics, and in explicit ownership of the resource's long-term health.

The tulsi plant did not die because any one neighbor was careless. It died because everyone assumed someone else was keeping count. That is the precise failure mode HR, compliance, and governance functions exist to prevent and the reason the healthiest organizations are the ones that water the plant long before they ever need the syrup.

References

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