

It's Not Your Fault, It's the System

Why high performers end up carrying too much responsibility in broken organizational structures — and what changes when you can finally see the pattern.

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Introduction

It's not your fault.

The reason teams break down, organizations stall, and people burn out isn't because people are failing.

It's because the systems around them make failure almost inevitable.

I didn't arrive at this idea through theory.

I arrived at it through pattern recognition over time — across very different environments, and very different people.

Even early on, I noticed something I couldn't fully articulate yet.

When conflict happened, most explanations immediately focused on who was wrong.

But that never fully explained what I was seeing.

Years later, working inside organizations — banking, IT, international teams — the same dynamic kept appearing in different forms.

Different people.

Different cultures.

Same underlying pattern.

Things would slow down.

Coordination would break.

Trust would erode.

And almost always, it would be explained as a people issue.

But when I started looking more closely at how work actually moved — how decisions were made, where information stopped, and what people could or couldn't see — a different layer became visible.

In one of my early roles inside a bank, tension between teams was persistent and visible.

The assumption was that it came from misalignment between people.

But when I traced how information actually flowed through the system, something else emerged.

The structure itself was producing the friction.

Not intentionally — but structurally.

It shaped what people could see, what they could decide, and what they had to compensate for.

And those gaps were being experienced as personal failure.

Once that became visible, the dynamic changed.

Not because people changed — but because the system became readable.

Over time, I began to see this pattern consistently across organizations.

And eventually, across a wider reality:
how teams operate, how leadership breaks down, how burnout emerges,
how responsibility silently concentrates.

This is not a theory about people.

It is a pattern about systems.

Most organizations do not fail because of individuals.

They fail because of how the system distributes:

- responsibility
- visibility
- and decision-making

And most operate in a small number of recurring system states:

- Centralized systems
- Consensus systems
- Chaos systems
- CoCreation systems

These are not models of organizations.

They are conditions systems fall into under pressure.

And most leadership problems are actually transitions between these states — not isolated failures.

This is why traditional solutions often fail.

They target behavior:

- communication
- performance
- accountability
- structure changes

But they rarely change the system state producing the behavior.

Which is where a different kind of lens becomes necessary.

The System Pulse is one way of making that visible.

A way of reading what kind of system you are actually operating inside — through patterns of dependency, execution flow, and responsibility concentration.

Because once the system becomes visible, the conversation changes.

From:

“How do we fix people?”

To:

“What kind of system are we actually inside — and what is it producing by design?”

It's not your fault.

It's the system you were never taught to see.

And once you can see it clearly, what looked like personal failure begins to reveal itself as structural pattern.

And what looked like chaos becomes something that can be understood — and redesigned.

This is where the work begins.

The People Who Carry Everything

There are people inside every organization who quietly become the system's stabilizing force.

They are the ones who step in before problems escalate.

The ones who notice what others miss.

The ones who absorb uncertainty, resolve tension, fill gaps, and keep execution moving when the structure around them begins to fail.

Over time, they become known as:

- reliable
- highly capable
- trusted under pressure
- impossible to replace

But beneath that reputation, something else is often happening.

Responsibility begins accumulating around them faster than authority, clarity, or support.

More decisions flow toward them.

More people depend on them.

More unresolved problems eventually land on their desk, in their inbox, or in their head.

Not always formally.

But functionally.

They become the person the organization unconsciously relies on to:

- compensate for weak coordination
- manage ambiguity
- absorb operational friction
- contain emotional instability
- and prevent breakdowns before they become visible

At first, this can feel rewarding.

Being needed creates meaning.
Being competent creates influence.
Being dependable creates identity.

But over time, the role quietly expands.

The work is no longer just execution.
It becomes stabilization.

And stabilization is difficult to switch off.

Even outside work, the system remains mentally active:

- anticipating problems
- carrying unresolved decisions
- monitoring risks
- preparing for failures before they happen

Many high performers live inside this pattern for years before recognizing what is actually happening.

They assume the pressure is personal.
That they need better boundaries, better delegation, better resilience,
better time management.

But often, the deeper reality is this:

The organization has gradually adapted around their capacity to carry what the system itself cannot properly hold.

System Signals

- Where does responsibility consistently land without being formally assigned?
- Who becomes the default stabilizer when uncertainty appears?

High Performance Becomes Organizational Infrastructure

Most organizations do not intentionally create dependency around individuals.

The pattern emerges gradually.

A capable person steps in to solve a problem.

Then solves another.

Then becomes the person others instinctively turn to when uncertainty appears.

Over time, competence stops being treated as a contribution and starts becoming infrastructure.

The organization quietly reorganizes itself around the people most willing — and most able — to carry what others avoid, delay, or escalate.

This rarely happens through formal design.

It happens through repeated adaptation.

The person who responds fastest receives more responsibility.

The person who stays calm under pressure absorbs more instability.

The person who can “handle it” becomes the unofficial solution to structural weakness.

Slowly, invisible agreements begin forming inside the system:

- difficult decisions move upward
- ambiguity moves toward the most responsible person
- emotional tension moves toward the most emotionally stable person
- operational gaps move toward the highest performer
- accountability concentrates around the people least likely to let things fail

What gets rewarded is not only performance.

It is over-functioning.

The ability to:

- rescue stalled execution
- compensate for weak coordination
- absorb uncertainty without complaint
- carry emotional tension quietly
- maintain momentum regardless of system quality

In many organizations, this behavior becomes normalized so completely that it is mistaken for leadership itself.

But the hidden cost is significant.

As dependency increases, the system loses its ability to distribute responsibility naturally.

Initiative weakens.

Decision-making narrows.

Autonomy decreases.

Escalation increases.

The stronger the individual becomes, the weaker the system's collective capacity often becomes around them.

This is one of the central paradoxes of dysfunctional organizational structures:

The people most committed to helping the system succeed can unintentionally become the mechanism that prevents the system from evolving.

System Signals:

- What capability in the system is quietly treated as something the organization "relies on" rather than manages?
- Where does speed or competence directly translate into more load instead of clearer boundaries?

The System Starts Organizing Around You

At a certain point, the issue is no longer just workload.

It becomes structure.

What many high performers eventually experience is not simply “having too much to do,” but becoming the central coordination point for an increasingly dependent system.

Without anyone explicitly deciding it, more and more begins flowing toward them:

- decisions
- escalations
- approvals
- unresolved tensions
- operational ambiguity
- accountability for outcomes others influence but do not fully own

This is how dependency concentration forms.

The organization gradually adapts around the people most capable of carrying complexity.

Not because anyone designed it that way.

But because systems naturally move toward the path of least resistance.

If one person consistently:

- steps in faster
- thinks more clearly
- absorbs pressure better
- resolves ambiguity quicker
- prevents failure more reliably

...the system learns to rely on them.

Over time, this creates invisible responsibility flows throughout the organization.

Problems that should remain distributed begin centralizing.

Decisions that should happen locally move upward.

Teams stop acting independently because escalation becomes safer than ownership.

What initially looked like leadership strength slowly becomes a structural bottleneck.

The irony is that this process is often interpreted as evidence of value.

The more indispensable someone becomes, the more the organization rewards and reinforces the pattern:

- more trust
- more visibility
- more influence
- more dependency

But underneath the recognition, the system itself is becoming less adaptive.

Execution slows without intervention.

Decisions stall without approval.

Initiative weakens.

People wait instead of act.

Eventually, the organization begins functioning less like a coordinated system and more like a wheel spinning around a central stabilizer.

This is one of the hidden dynamics inside many centralized organizations and struggling scale-ups:

The more capable the individual becomes, the more responsibility the system silently redistributes toward them.

And because this redistribution happens gradually, most people experience the consequences personally long before they recognize them structurally.

They feel:

- exhausted
- trapped
- hyper-responsible
- unable to disconnect

But what they are often experiencing is not merely pressure.

They are experiencing the weight of becoming organizational infrastructure.

System Signals:

- What starts to slow down or fragment when a specific person is not involved?
- Where has reliability replaced structure as the system's way of functioning?

The Hidden System Beneath the Organization

Most organizations believe they operate according to their formal structure.

The org chart says one thing.

Job descriptions say another.

Leadership principles, values, and operating models attempt to define how work is supposed to happen.

But beneath the formal organization, another system is usually operating.

An invisible one.

This hidden operating system determines:

- how decisions actually get made
- where responsibility actually concentrates
- who absorbs uncertainty
- where escalation flows
- how conflict gets managed
- who compensates when coordination breaks down

And in many organizations, this invisible system has far more influence on daily reality than the formal structure itself.

On paper, responsibility may appear distributed.

In practice, dependency concentrates around a small number of people.

On paper, teams may appear autonomous.

In reality, execution slows until specific individuals intervene.

On paper, decision-making may appear collaborative.

In practice, people wait for signals, approval, or emotional safety before acting.

This is why many organizations experience the same problems repeatedly despite restructuring, new leadership initiatives, or process changes.

Because the visible organization changes while the hidden operating system remains untouched.

Over time, these invisible patterns become self-reinforcing.

Dependency creates more escalation.

Escalation creates more centralized decision-making.

Centralized decision-making weakens autonomy.

Reduced autonomy increases hesitation.

Hesitation creates further dependency.

Eventually, organizations can begin functioning in ways that unintentionally train learned helplessness into the system.

People stop trusting their own authority.

Initiative decreases.

Ownership narrows.

Responsibility flows upward while accountability becomes increasingly diffuse.

The result is often a growing gap between:

- how the organization says it operates
and
- how it actually survives.

This is why chronic overload inside organizations is rarely random.

It is structural.

What appears on the surface as:

- communication issues
- leadership strain
- slow execution
- burnout
- lack of accountability
- constant firefighting

...is often the visible symptom of a deeper system architecture operating underneath.

Once this hidden layer becomes visible, the conversation changes.

The issue is no longer:

“Who is failing?”

The issue becomes:

“What kind of system keeps reproducing this pattern?”

System Signals:

- Where does real decision-making differ from the official structure?
- What parts of execution only work because of informal coordination outside the system design?

The Four System States

Most organizations do not fail randomly.

They shift between a small number of recurring system states that shape how responsibility, decision-making, and execution actually function under pressure.

These states are rarely visible in formal structure.

They are experienced through patterns of coordination, overload, and dependency.

Understanding them allows a different kind of clarity:
not about individual behavior, but about system condition.



Centralized State

Dependency on the leader

In this state, the system naturally pulls toward a central point of decision-making and responsibility.

The organization becomes dependent on one or a few individuals to resolve ambiguity, make decisions, and restore momentum when things stall.

Characteristics:

- constant escalation to the top
- decision bottlenecks
- leadership overload
- organizational passivity
- hidden dependency on key individuals

Core experience:

“Everything comes back to me.”

This state often feels efficient at first, because decisions happen quickly when centralized.

But over time, it reduces autonomy and creates structural overload at the center.



Consensus State

Dependency on group alignment

In this state, the system becomes dependent on agreement before action.

Decision-making shifts from clarity and ownership to alignment processes that slow execution.

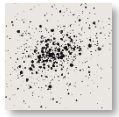
Characteristics:

- slow decision cycles
- over-processing of options
- diffusion of responsibility
- alignment paralysis
- avoidance of tension or disagreement

Core experience:

“Nothing moves unless everyone agrees.”

This state often appears collaborative on the surface, but can mask hesitation and unresolved conflict beneath it.



Chaos State

Dependency on self-preservation and hyper-independence

In this state, coordination breaks down and individuals revert to operating in isolation.

Responsibility becomes fragmented, and each part of the system optimizes for its own survival rather than collective coherence.

Characteristics:

- fragmented execution
- unclear ownership
- reactive behavior
- lack of trust across functions
- isolated decision-making

Core experience:

“Everyone is operating alone.”

This state often emerges when coordination structures fail or trust in the system is low.



CoCreation State

Distributed responsibility and adaptive coordination

In this state, the system is able to distribute responsibility without losing coherence.

Decision-making is clear, autonomy is real, and coordination happens through shared understanding rather than constant escalation.

Characteristics:

- shared intelligence across roles
- clear ownership and autonomy
- distributed execution
- resilient coordination under pressure
- sustainable performance without heroics

Core experience:

“The system functions without heroics.”

This is not a fixed endpoint, but a dynamic capacity a system can develop and return to under changing conditions.

Each of these states is not a label for organizations, but a description of how systems behave when exposed to complexity, pressure, and misalignment.

Most importantly, organizations rarely exist in only one state.

They shift between them.

And those shifts often explain more about performance, burnout, and dependency than any individual behavior ever could.

System States

- Where does work stall because it depends on one central point, group alignment, or isolated execution rather than distributed flow?
- Which system state appears most often when pressure increases?

Why Smart People Stay Too Long

From the outside, it often doesn't make sense.

Highly capable people, working in clearly dysfunctional systems, staying far longer than expected.

Not because they don't see the problems.

Not because they lack options.

And not because they are unaware of the cost.

But because their relationship to the system is often deeper than the role they are performing inside it.

In many cases, usefulness becomes identity.

Over time, being the person who:

- solves problems
- stabilizes chaos
- absorbs pressure
- prevents failure
- keeps things moving

...can quietly shift from what someone does into who they are.

Leaving, or stepping back, is no longer just a professional decision.

It becomes a disruption of identity.

There is also often a less visible layer: guilt.

Not necessarily explicit or rational, but embedded in the system dynamic itself.

Guilt for how much others rely on them.

Guilt for what might break if they stop compensating.

Guilt for the instability that could surface if they are no longer holding things together.

In this way, responsibility becomes emotionally binding, not just operational.

Another force is fear of collapse — not personal collapse, but system collapse.

The awareness that if they step away, things may not fail immediately, but certain gaps will become visible. And those gaps may expose deeper structural weaknesses that others are not prepared to handle.

So staying begins to feel like containment.

A way of keeping the system from revealing its fragility.

There is also meaning in indispensability.

Being needed creates clarity.

Being essential creates purpose.

Being the stabilizer creates significance.

Even when it is exhausting, it is still meaningful in a very direct way: the system responds to you.

And finally, there is loyalty.

Not always to the current structure, but to the history of effort invested inside it.

To the people built up over time.

To the version of the system that once felt like it could work.

And sometimes, to an unspoken belief that leaving would mean abandoning something unfinished rather than recognizing something misaligned.

Underneath all of this, there is often a deeper pattern — not personal, but developmental.

Many high-functioning individuals learned early in life to stabilize unstable environments.

They became the one who adapted, compensated, anticipated, and held things together before it was explicitly required.

What once was a survival adaptation later becomes a professional strength.

And then, eventually, it becomes the structure the system relies on.

From the outside, it can look like overcommitment or difficulty letting go.

From the inside, it often feels like responsibility that cannot easily be returned.

Not because they are trapped.

But because the system and the self have, over time, become difficult to separate.

System Signals:

- Where has usefulness become indistinguishable from identity?
- What would structurally collapse—or be exposed—if a key person stopped compensating?

Burnout Is Often a System Signal — Not a Personal Failure

Burnout is usually described as an individual condition.

Something that happens when a person reaches their limit.

When resilience is depleted.

When boundaries are weak.

When coping strategies are insufficient.

But in many complex organizations, this framing misses the deeper structure entirely.

Burnout is often not a personal failure of capacity.

It is a signal of system design.

More specifically, it is what happens when responsibility becomes concentrated faster than it can be distributed.

When this occurs, the experience of burnout is rarely sudden.

It accumulates gradually through patterns such as:

- concentrated responsibility flowing toward the same individuals
- chronic adaptation to instability and shifting demands
- unresolved system tension that never fully closes
- invisible operational load carried outside formal roles and boundaries

Over time, the system begins to rely on over-functioning as a default operating condition.

Not as an exception.

But as a requirement for continuity.

In such environments, the most capable individuals often become the primary buffer between structural weakness and operational failure.

They absorb:

- unclear priorities
- missing coordination
- delayed decisions
- incomplete ownership
- emotional and relational friction

What appears externally as high performance is often, internally, continuous compensation.

This is why traditional explanations of burnout often feel incomplete to those experiencing it.

Because they are being asked to interpret a structural condition as a personal limitation.

But the pattern is different.

Many leaders are not exhausted because they are incapable.

They are exhausted because the system requires over-functioning in order to remain operational.

And when that becomes the baseline condition of work, recovery is no longer just a matter of rest or resilience.

It requires a different level of visibility into how responsibility, dependency, and execution are actually distributed within the system itself.

System Signals:

- What workload remains stable even when capacity clearly does not?
- Where is over-functioning silently embedded into “how things get done”?

Seeing the System Changes the Pattern

At a certain point, the issue is no longer understanding what is happening.

It is seeing what is actually happening clearly enough that it can no longer be reduced to personal effort.

This is where system awareness becomes the turning point.

Because once the system becomes visible, a different set of questions emerges.

Not:

- “How do I manage this better?”

But:

- “Why is the system producing this pattern in the first place?”

And that shift matters more than it initially appears.

Because visibility changes what is possible.

When the structure becomes visible, so do the points where it can be influenced.

When dependency flows become visible, so does the possibility of redistributing responsibility.

When execution bottlenecks become visible, so does the opportunity to redesign how work actually moves.

This is the moment where many people realize something important:

Most of the solutions they have already tried were aimed at the individual, not the system.

Common responses tend to include:

- productivity systems
- delegation advice
- resilience coaching
- executive coaching
- hiring more people
- restructuring teams
- adopting leadership frameworks

Each of these can help at the surface level.

But they often fail to resolve the underlying pattern when the system itself continues to reproduce the same dynamics.

Because the issue is not only effort or capability.

It is how responsibility, dependency, and decision-making are structurally organized.

Without addressing that layer, improvements tend to remain temporary.

The system adapts around the intervention and returns to its previous equilibrium.

This is where a different lens becomes necessary.

Not one focused on optimizing parts of the system in isolation, but on understanding the system as a continuously operating whole.

This is the gap that the CoCreation Codes™ are designed to address.

Not as a fixed model or one-time framework, but as a continuous operating loop for complex systems — one that can detect, interrupt, and redesign how work actually functions under pressure.

At this level, the question is no longer:

- “How do I perform better inside this system?”

But:

- “How does this system actually reproduce itself, and what would it take to change that pattern?”

To support that shift in perspective, the System Pulse was created.

The System **Pulse**

A rapid diagnostic designed to help leaders identify the hidden operating state of their organization — including patterns of dependency, overload, fragmentation, and coordination failure.



It offers a way to make the invisible structure temporarily visible, so that it can be worked with directly rather than experienced only as pressure.

Because you cannot redesign a system you cannot yet see. [Take your system's pulse.](#)

System Signals:

- What keeps repeating even after new tools, structures, or decisions are introduced?
- Where are solutions applied to behavior while the underlying system remains unchanged?

The CoCreation Codes™

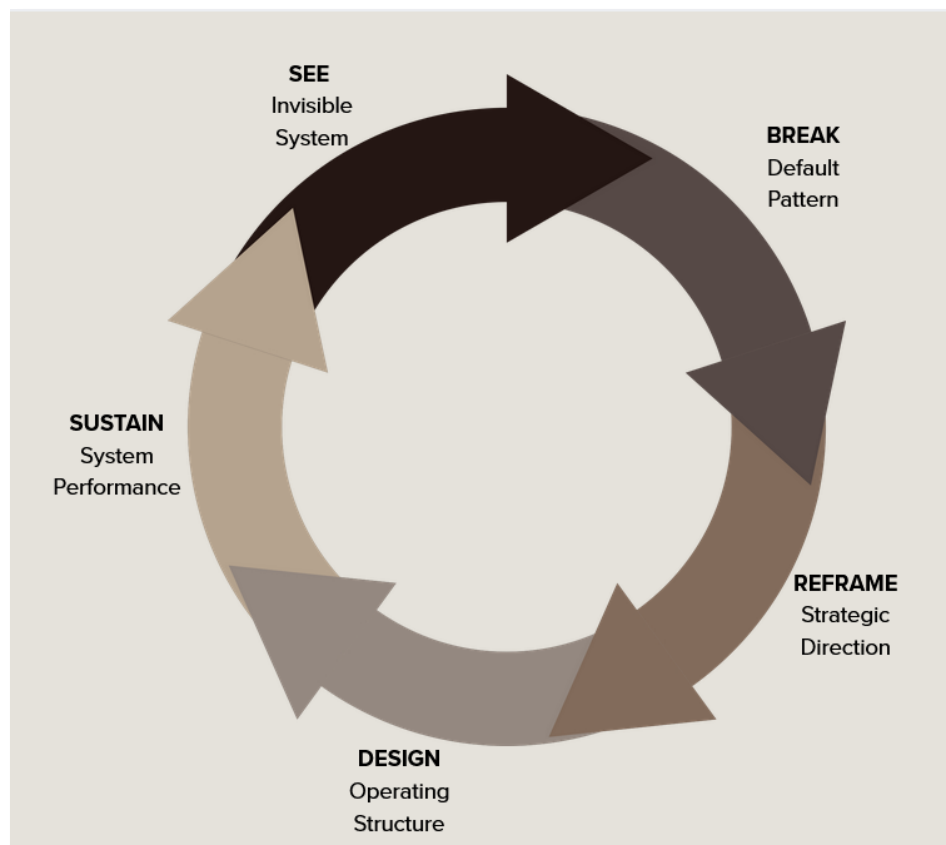
Most of what people experience as organizational dysfunction is not a lack of effort, intelligence, or intent.

It is a breakdown in how systems continuously process complexity — how they see it, interpret it, and reorganize around it in real time.

The CoCreation Codes™ are not a framework for optimization.

They are a way of working with systems that are already operating under pressure, dependency, and hidden coordination patterns — and making those patterns visible, interruptible, and redesignable.

They function as a continuous loop rather than a linear method.



The CoCreation Codes. a cyclical operating system for complex leadership environments

1. See the Invisible System

Make the actual operating system visible beneath the formal structure.

This includes:

- dependency patterns
- decision flows
- hidden escalation paths
- responsibility concentration
- coordination gaps

Before anything can be changed, it must first be seen accurately.

2. Break the Default Pattern

Interrupt the automatic behaviors the system has normalized under pressure.

This includes:

- over-reliance on specific individuals
- habitual escalation routes
- unexamined assumptions about “how things get done”
- inherited coordination habits

The goal is not disruption for its own sake, but breaking unconscious repetition.

3. Reframe the Strategic Direction

Translate breakdown, friction, or overload into clearer system intelligence.

This involves:

- clarifying what the system is actually optimizing for

- distinguishing signal from noise
- aligning intent with operational reality
- redefining what “progress” means in context

Most systems do not need more direction — they need clearer alignment between direction and structure.

4. Design the Operating Structure

Redesign how responsibility, decision-making, and execution are distributed.

This includes:

- role clarity
- decision rights
- coordination mechanisms
- load distribution
- reducing dependency on heroics

The focus shifts from individuals to system architecture.

5. Sustain System Performance

Ensure the system does not revert back to dependency-driven patterns under stress.

This involves:

- reinforcing new coordination behaviors
- maintaining distributed responsibility
- adapting without central overload
- building resilience into structure rather than individuals

Without this layer, systems tend to return to familiar patterns under pressure.

The CoCreation Codes™ are not a one-time intervention or a fixed methodology.

They are a continuous operating loop for complex systems — designed to detect, interrupt, and redesign how organizations function as they evolve under real-world conditions.

System Signals:

- Where is complexity still being handled reactively instead of structurally?
- What would immediately break if informal coordination was removed?

The Real Shift

At a certain point, the work is no longer about improving performance.

It is about changing the relationship between the individual and the system they are operating inside.

For many high performers, the default position has been one of carrying:

- carrying decisions
- carrying emotional stability
- carrying execution gaps
- carrying uncertainty
- carrying outcomes the system itself does not fully distribute

Over time, this becomes normalized.

It is no longer experienced as exceptional effort.

It becomes the baseline of how work is done.

But there is a different way systems can function.

One where responsibility is not concentrated, but coordinated.

Where clarity reduces the need for constant intervention.

Where execution does not depend on a small number of people absorbing structural gaps.

The shift is not about doing less.

It is about no longer having to compensate for what the system is not designed to hold.

From carrying to coordinating.

From rescuing to designing.

From control to coherence.

From exhaustion to systemic clarity.

This is not a motivational shift.

It does not require increased effort or better discipline.

It requires visibility into how the system is actually operating — and the willingness to stop interpreting structural patterns as personal limitations.

When that visibility arrives, many things that once felt personal begin to look structural.

And what once felt like responsibility becomes something else entirely:
designable.

Not perfect.

Not static.

But capable of being understood, adjusted, and redistributed.

That is the real shift.

Not becoming stronger within the system.

But finally seeing the system clearly enough to no longer need to carry it in the same way.

System Signals:

- Where is carrying still the default mechanism for keeping the system functional?
- What becomes unnecessary once responsibility is properly distributed?

CO CREATION
— INSTITUTE

See the
system
Change the
Pattern

