Organizational Awareness Scan™

Companion to Becoming a Catalyst | John Coné

Seeing Change Before It Becomes Obvious

Purpose

Organizations rarely become unprepared because nobody was watching the future. They become unprepared because the signals that mattered were missed, discounted, interpreted through old assumptions, or recognized too late.

The good news for traditional talent development professionals is that we have been doing Organization Scans for decades, so we have a good sense of the discipline they take. But this is a different kind of scan. A typical environmental scan by a corporate training department examines both internal workforce capabilities and external labor market trends to identify gaps, opportunities, and risks that influence talent development and strategic planning. Corporate training departments use environmental scans to assess current and future talent needs, align workforce capabilities with business goals, and anticipate changes that may affect training programs or employee development initiatives.

This is vastly different. The Organizational Awareness Scan provides a disciplined way to periodically look outside and inside the organization for evidence that something may be changing—particularly something that could alter the capabilities the organization needs or the way those capabilities develop.

It complements the Catalyst Field Notes. Field Notes ask: *What am I noticing as I move through the organization?* The Awareness Scan asks: *Where should we deliberately look for change we might otherwise miss?*

A traditional training org scan tries to predict the future. This Scan does not. Its purpose is to help the organization become less dependent on getting the future right.

When to Use the Scan

Use the Organizational Awareness Scan periodically, perhaps quarterly or semiannually, and at moments of significant strategic change.

It can be completed individually by a Catalyst preparing for a strategic conversation, or collectively by a small group deliberately chosen to bring different perspectives. The collective version will usually be more powerful.

Include people who see different parts of the system: business leaders, customers or customer-facing employees, technologists, operations leaders, Talent professionals, newer employees, boundary spanners, and people close to emerging work. Do not ask only senior leaders. People at the center of the organization often see what is important. People at the edges often see what is changing.

The Scanning Discipline

For every domain, resist beginning with: What trends are occurring? Instead ask: What are we seeing that is different? Then: Why might it matter? And finally: What assumption would we reconsider if this signal proves to be real?

That sequence, Observe, then Interpret, then Challenge, is the heart of the Scan.

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PART ONE Look Outside

1. Customers

What is changing?

Consider:

What are customers asking for that they were not asking for before?

What are they no longer willing to tolerate?

Where are expectations rising unusually quickly?

What are customers doing for themselves that we once did for them?

What are they using differently than we intended?

Which customer behaviors surprise us?

Which customers seem to be ahead of the rest?

Signal

What are we observing?

_____

_____

_____

Why might it matter?

_____

_____

If this continues, what capability might become more—or less—important?

_____

_____

What assumption might we need to reconsider?

_____

_____

2. Technology and AI

What is changing?

Consider:

What can technology now do that recently required people?

What can people now do because of technology that they could not do before?

Where are employees using AI in ways we did not design?

Which previously scarce expertise is becoming readily accessible?

What new judgment is required because technology has changed the work?

Where is technology changing the rate at which work itself evolves?

Signal

What are we observing?

_____

Why might it matter?

_____

Capability implication

_____

Assumption to reconsider

_____

3. Competitors and Industry

What is changing?

Consider:

What are competitors doing differently?

Who is entering the market from somewhere unexpected?

Which industry boundaries are becoming less meaningful?

Where are business models changing?

What are leading organizations beginning to stop doing?

What previously differentiated us that may be becoming commonplace?

Signal

_____

Why might it matter?

_____

Capability implication

_____

Assumption to reconsider

_____

4. Labor and Skills

What is changing?

Consider:

Which capabilities are becoming harder to acquire?

Which are becoming easier?

Where is AI democratizing expertise?

What work is becoming less dependent on traditional credentials?

Which roles are changing faster than job descriptions?

What are employees increasingly expecting from work?

Where are people assembling new combinations of skills?

Signal

_____

Why might it matter?

_____

Capability implication

_____

Assumption to reconsider

_____

5. Social, Economic and Regulatory Environment

What is changing?

Consider:

What changes in regulation could alter how work is performed?

What social expectations are affecting employees or customers?

What economic assumptions are becoming less reliable?

What geopolitical developments could alter access to people, knowledge, technology, or markets?

Which previously stable conditions now seem less stable?

Signal

_____

Why might it matter?

_____

Capability implication

_____

Assumption to reconsider

_____

PART TWO Look Inside

External signals often receive more attention because they look like "the future." But some of the earliest evidence of the future may already exist **inside the organization**.

6. Work

What is changing?

Consider:

What are people doing differently from a year ago?

Which workflows are being redesigned informally?

What work is disappearing?

What new work is appearing?

Where are people creating workarounds?

Where are role boundaries blurring?

Which tasks increasingly combine human and AI contribution?

Signal

_____

Why might it matter?

_____

Capability implication

_____

Assumption to reconsider

_____

7. People

What is changing?

Consider:

What are employees asking for that they did not ask for previously?

What are they learning without waiting for Talent?

Where are new skill combinations appearing?

Which people are succeeding in unexpected ways?

Where are employees abandoning established practices?

What behaviors are spreading informally?

Signal

_____

Why might it matter?

_____

Capability implication

_____

Assumption to reconsider

_____

8. Managers and Leaders

What is changing?

Consider:

What new problems are managers bringing to us?

What are managers beginning to do themselves that they once asked Talent to do?

Where is decision-making moving?

What leadership practices appear less effective than before?

What new forms of judgment are leaders requiring?

Where are managers becoming capability builders?

Where are they becoming bottlenecks?

Signal

_____

Why might it matter?

_____

Capability implication

_____

Assumption to reconsider

_____

9. Knowledge

What is changing?

Consider:

Where is knowledge moving faster?

Where is it becoming trapped?

What communities have become important sources of expertise?

What knowledge is being generated through work?

Where is AI changing access to organizational knowledge?

What expertise that once resided in individuals now resides in systems?

Where are people improving practices faster than formal knowledge can be updated?

Signal

_____

Why might it matter?

_____

Capability implication

_____

Assumption to reconsider

_____

10. Capability

What is changing?

Consider:

What are people becoming unexpectedly good at?

What capabilities appear to be declining?

Which capability needs are appearing in several unrelated places?

Where is capability emerging without a formal development initiative?

Which existing capabilities are becoming more strategically important?

Which previously critical capabilities may be becoming less differentiating?

What capability seems to enable several others?

Signal

_____

Why might it matter?

_____

Capability implication

_____

Assumption to reconsider

_____

11. Organizational Practices

What is changing?

Consider:

Which established processes are people bypassing?

What new routines are appearing?

Where is experimentation becoming normal?

Where is reflection becoming embedded in work?

Which policies or systems are increasingly at odds with how work actually happens?

Where are practices being continuously refined?

What is the formal organization teaching that the informal organization has already moved beyond?

Signal

_____

Why might it matter?

_____

Capability implication

_____

PART THREE

Don't Review Eleven Lists

The purpose of the Scan is not to produce eleven collections of trends. After scanning the domains, put the categories aside. Now ask:

What seems to be happening across them?

Look for the same patterns we use in Catalyst Field Notes:

REPETITION
The same signal appears in several places.

CONVERGENCE
Different signals point toward a common change.

CONTRADICTION
What we observe conflicts with what the organization believes.

ACCELERATION
Something is changing more quickly.

CONNECTION
Previously unrelated changes appear connected.

ABSENCE
Something expected is not happening.

POSITIVE DEVIANCE
Someone is achieving unusually strong results differently.

LANGUAGE CHANGE
People are beginning to describe the work, problem, or opportunity differently.

And add one especially important lens here:

ASSUMPTION FAILURE
Evidence is accumulating that an assumption underlying strategy, workforce planning, talent strategy, or capability investment may no longer hold.

PART FOUR

The Signal Board

Do not carry every observation forward. Select the signals that deserve continued attention.

Emerging Signal	Evidence	Why It Might Matter	Assumption Challenged	Confidence
_____	_____	_____	_____	Weak / Emerging / Strong
_____	_____	_____	_____	Weak / Emerging / Strong
_____	_____	_____	_____	Weak / Emerging / Strong
_____	_____	_____	_____	Weak / Emerging / Strong

Emerging Signal	Evidence	Why It Might Matter	Assumption Challenged	Confidence
_____	_____	_____	_____	Weak / Emerging / Strong

I would deliberately limit this to **five signals**.

If a scanning session produces 27 strategic signals, the organization hasn't scanned. It has collected.

PART FIVE

From Signal to Capability

For each of the most important signals, ask:

SIGNAL

What appears to be changing?

_____

EVIDENCE

What makes us think so?

_____

UNCERTAINTY

What else could explain what we are seeing?

_____

ASSUMPTION

If the signal is real, what current assumption becomes questionable?

_____

CAPABILITY

What might we need to become better at?

_____

CURRENT READINESS

Do we appear capable of developing that capability rapidly if it becomes important?

□ Yes
□ Partially
□ No
□ We don't know

WHAT WOULD WE WATCH NEXT?

What evidence would strengthen or weaken our interpretation?

_____

WHAT, IF ANYTHING, SHOULD WE DO NOW?

□ Nothing — continue watching
□ Ask more questions
□ Gather evidence

□ Convene a conversation
□ Conduct a small experiment
□ Examine the Capability System
□ Elevate to the Capability Outlook
□ Immediate action is warranted

Action / owner

_____

_____

PART SIX

Challenge the Organization's Assumptions

This is where I think the Scan can become more than an environmental-scanning tool.

Complete these sentences:

We currently assume...

_____

Evidence causing us to question that assumption...

_____

If the assumption proves wrong...

_____

We would wish we had become better at...

_____

One thing we could do now that would be valuable across several possible futures...

_____

PART SEVEN

Preparedness Check

At the end of the Scan, don't ask only: Are we prepared for what we think is coming? Ask: **If our assumptions are right, what are we doing to prepare?**

_____

If our assumptions are wrong...

What capabilities would still serve us well?

_____

If something entirely different happens...

How quickly could we recognize it, learn from it, and develop whatever capability it requires?

_____

Where are we most dependent on getting the prediction right?

_____

What could make us less dependent on being right?

That last question may be the most important question in the entire Scan.

PART EIGHT

Where Does the Signal Go Next?

Not everything discovered through the Awareness Scan should become a project. Signals can fall into any of several categories.

RECORD

Interesting, but insufficient evidence. Record in the **Catalyst Field Notes.**

WATCH

Potentially meaningful; look deliberately for more evidence. Make sure they are in the **Field Notes and note them for the next Awareness Scan**

EXPLORE

Enough evidence to warrant collective sensemaking. Make the signal part of a **Catalyst Conversation**

MAP

The issue may represent a meaningful capability challenge. Consider a Capability System Assessment and/or Capability Map if you do not have one already.

ACCELERATE

A needed capability is emerging, but learning is moving too slowly. Plot it on a **Learning Velocity Map and use the Accelerator Kit.**

ELEVATE

The pattern may have strategic significance. Be sure it is a part of your **Capability Outlook.**

ACT

The need is already sufficiently clear and important. **Intervene now.**

And the same principle we established for Field Notes applies here: Observation is not an excuse for inaction. If the organization clearly needs help, help. The discipline is to avoid acting on certainty we don't possess, not to avoid acting when evidence and circumstances warrant it.

Catalyst Watch For…

Trend collecting.
The Scan becomes a catalogue of AI, demographics, geopolitics, and other familiar trends rather than a search for evidence that matters to *this* organization.

External fixation.
Everyone searches outside while some of the strongest signals are already visible in work.

Executive consensus.
Everyone sees the same future because everyone occupies roughly the same vantage point.

Novelty bias.
Something attracts attention because it is new rather than because it is consequential.

Confirmation bias.
Signals reinforce the strategy because participants unconsciously search for evidence that the strategy is right.

Premature capability building.
Every emerging signal becomes a development initiative.

False precision.
Confidence labels begin masquerading as probabilities.

Signal overload.
Everything is important, so nothing receives sustained attention.

Scanning without remembering.
Each scan begins from scratch rather than revisiting what earlier scans suggested.

Teaching yesterday's answer.
Formal development continues codifying a practice even as evidence shows that the practice itself is evolving.

The One-Page Scan

For experienced Catalysts, the entire instrument can eventually collapse into six questions:

1. WHAT ARE WE SEEING?

What is changing outside and inside the organization?

_____

_____

2. WHAT IS DIFFERENT?

What surprises, contradicts, accelerates, converges, disappears, or appears for the first time?

_____

_____

3. WHAT MIGHT IT MEAN?

What are several plausible interpretations?

_____

_____

4. WHAT ASSUMPTION DOES IT CHALLENGE?

What would we reconsider if the signal proves real?

_____

_____

5. WHAT MIGHT WE NEED TO BECOME BETTER AT?

What capability implication could follow?

_____

_____

6. WHAT SHOULD WE DO NOW?

Watch? Explore? Map? Experiment? Elevate? Act?

_____

_____

Periodic Catalyst Reflection

After completing the Scan, ask:

What did we see that we were not looking for?

What surprised us most?

Where did people with different vantage points see different futures?

Which assumption generated the most disagreement?

Which signal could have the greatest consequences if we are wrong about it?

Which capability would be useful across several plausible futures?

What are we already seeing inside the organization that may represent the beginnings of that capability?

Where are we relying most heavily on prediction?

And finally:

What would make us better prepared even if none of our predictions come true?

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