Catalyst Conversation™

Companion to Becoming a Catalyst | John Coné

"Catalysts don't diagnose organizations. They help organizations diagnose themselves."

Purpose

The purpose of this conversation is not to evaluate how good your organization currently is at a particular capability. It is to understand the Capability System that continually develops, strengthens, and sustains that capability. The goal is understanding, not scoring. Although you can use this instrument individually, it is best used with a group. It can be broken up into multiple discussions.

The Catalyst Mindset

Throughout the conversation, remember four principles.

Capability is produced by systems, not isolated initiatives.

Every part of the system influences every other part.

Evidence is more valuable than opinion.

The objective is to identify experiments—not perfect solutions.

Using the Instrument

To begin, choose one organizational capability that is strategically important.

Examples include:

Innovation

Customer Focus

Leadership

AI Fluency

Quality

Safety

Agility

Collaboration

Decision Quality

Learning

Inclusion

Employee Focus

How To Record Your Thinking

Rather than asking, "How good are we?" ask, "To what extent does this part of our Capability System consistently strengthen the capability we are discussing?"

For every dimension:

Choose the descriptor that best reflects your current reality.

Record the observations that led to your conclusion.

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Identify important interdependencies.

Suggest one experiment that might strengthen the system.

Use whatever descriptors feel most natural. High-Moderate-Low, Mostly High, Moderately Low, or anything else that helps you communicate your thinking.

The real value comes from explaining **why** you chose your descriptors.

PART I

INFRASTRUCTURE *What systems make this capability possible?*

Infrastructure consists of the organizational assets that enable capability to develop and grow.

Accessibility Can people easily find and use the resources they need?

Rating _____

Evidence

_____

Interdependencies

_____

Experiment

_____

Integration Do the organization's systems reinforce one another? Examples:

Learning

Performance

Talent

Technology

AI

Knowledge Management

Career Development

Communities

Measurement

Rating _____

Evidence

_____

Strategic Relevance

Does the infrastructure support today's strategic priorities rather than yesterday's?

Rating _____

Evidence

_____

Performance Enablement

Does the infrastructure help people perform—not simply learn?

Rating _____

Evidence

_____

Measurement

Does the organization understand whether the infrastructure is actually strengthening capability?

Rating _____

Evidence

_____

SUMMARY CONVERSATION

Before moving on, discuss together:

What surprised us most?

Which infrastructure appears strongest?

Which appears weakest?

Are there important systems that don't yet exist?

Which interdependencies seem most significant?

Catalyst Tip

Don't rush to agreement.

When two people rate the same dimension differently, ask:

"What did each of us observe that led us to those different conclusions?"

Differences in perception often reveal hidden parts of the Capability System.

PART II

EXPERIENCES *How do people actually become capable?*

Capabilities rarely emerge from information alone. They develop through meaningful experiences that stretch people, reinforce learning, and create new ways of working.

Repetition

Do people repeatedly exercise this capability?

Rating _____

Rating _____

Evidence

_____

Application

Is capability developed through meaningful work rather than isolated events?

Rating _____

Evidence

_____

Reflection

Do people routinely learn from experience?

Rating _____

Evidence

_____

Collaboration

Does capability develop through interaction with others?

Rating _____

Evidence

_____

Reinforcement

Do experiences reinforce and strengthen the capability over time?

Rating _____

Evidence

_____

SUMMARY CONVERSATION

Discuss.

Which experiences most accelerate capability?

Which experiences are missing?

What experiences unintentionally weaken capability?

Which experiences should occur earlier or more often?

Catalyst Tip

When discussing experiences, resist the temptation to focus on courses. Instead ask: **"What experiences actually changed how people think or perform?"** Catalysts build capability through experiences—not events.

PART III

CONDITIONS *Does the environment encourage capability to flourish?*

Infrastructure makes capability possible. Experiences help capability develop. Conditions determine whether capability becomes part of everyday organizational life.

Leadership

Do leaders consistently model the capability?

Rating _____

Evidence

_____

Expectations

Does everyone understand why this capability matters?

Rating _____

Evidence

_____

Trust

Rating _____

Evidence

_____

Consequences

Are the consequences of people's actions intentionally—or unintentionally—reinforcing the desired capability?

Rating _____

Evidence

_____

Time

Do people have sufficient capacity to develop the capability?

Rating _____

Evidence

_____

Information Flow

Rating _____

Evidence

_____

Accountability

Do people feel personally responsible for strengthening this capability?

Rating _____

Evidence

_____

SUMMARY CONVERSATION

Discuss.

Which conditions most strengthen the capability?

Which conditions unintentionally undermine it?

If we changed one condition, which would produce the greatest improvement?

Which condition depends most heavily on leadership?

Catalyst Tip

Culture rarely changes directly. It changes because leaders redesign the conditions people experience every day. When executives ask for a **culture of** innovation, agility, customer focus, or accountability, they are usually asking for conditions that allow a particular capability to emerge.

SYNTHESIS

Now step back. Look at the Capability System as a whole.

Where is the system strongest?

_____

What should we preserve?

_____

Where is it weakest?

What appears to be limiting the capability?

_____

What patterns do we notice?

Do the same issues appear repeatedly?

Where are the bottlenecks?

_____

Which interdependencies surprised us?

Which issues turned out to be connected that we previously viewed separately?

_____

Which experiment would produce the greatest improvement?

If we changed only one thing during the next six months, what would it be?

_____

THE CATALYST REFLECTION

Complete these statements.

We entered this conversation believing…

_____

We are leaving this conversation believing…

_____

The most important insight we gained was…

_____

_____

The capability we originally chose is actually being limited by…

_____

The most powerful experiment we could begin next week is…

_____

Final Question

If this Capability System became significantly stronger…

What new possibilities would it create for the organization?

Example Completed Instrument 2 – The Catalyst Conversation™

Illustrative example based on a fictional executive team discussing the capability of Customer Focus.

PART I – Infrastructure

Accessibility

Rating: Moderate (mixed views)

Evidence:
Marketing accesses CRM easily; Operations receives delayed customer information.

Interdependencies:
Information Flow; Technology

Experiment:
Pilot a daily customer dashboard.

Integration

Rating: Moderate

Evidence:
Business systems optimize functions more than customer outcomes.

Interdependencies:
Measurement; Recognition

Experiment:
Begin executive reviews with customer outcomes.

Strategic Relevance

Rating: High

Evidence:
All executives identify Customer Focus as a strategic priority.

Experiment:
Review talent systems for alignment.

Performance Enablement

Rating: Moderate

Evidence:
People understand the concept but lack day-to-day support.

Interdependencies:
Experiences

Experiment:
Embed customer decision aids.

Measurement

Rating: Low

Evidence:
Customer outcomes are measured; customer capability is not.

Interdependencies:
Leadership

Experiment:
Develop capability indicators.

Infrastructure Summary

Surprise: Integration—not technology—is the limiting factor.
Strongest: Strategic Relevance.
Weakest: Measurement.

PART II – Experiences

Repetition

Rating: Moderate

Evidence:
Customer interaction varies widely by role.

Experiment:
Rotate managers through customer-facing work.

Application

Rating: Moderate

Evidence:
Learning transfers inconsistently.

Experiment:
Redesign projects around customer outcomes.

Reflection

Rating: Low

Evidence:
Teams analyze failures but rarely successes.

Experiment:
15-minute after-action reflections.

Collaboration

Rating: Moderate

Evidence:
Cross-functional work occurs mainly during crises.

Experiment:
Monthly learning forum.

Reinforcement

Rating: Low

Evidence:
New habits fade after initiatives.

Experiment:
Quarterly capability reviews.

Experience Summary: The team shifted from 'we need more training' to 'we need richer experiences and reflection.'

PART III – Conditions

Leadership

Rating: High

Evidence:
Leaders consistently model customer focus.

Experiment:
Continue visible sponsorship.

Expectations

Rating: Moderate

Evidence:
Purpose is clear; behaviors are less clear.

Experiment:
Clarify expected behaviors.

Trust

Rating: High

Evidence:
People openly challenged assumptions.

Experiment:
Preserve openness.

Consequences

Rating: Low

Evidence:
Efficiency rewarded more than customer-centered behavior.

Experiment:
Align rewards.

Time

Rating: Low

Evidence:
Little protected reflection time.

Experiment:
Reserve one hour monthly.

Information Flow

Rating: Moderate

Evidence:
Knowledge moves within functions better than across them.

Experiment:
Cross-functional reviews.

Accountability

Rating: Moderate

Evidence:
Ownership is diffuse.

Experiment:
Assign executive sponsor.

Synthesis

Strongest: Leadership commitment.
Weakest: Reflection, Measurement, Consequences.
Pattern: Knowledge exists but does not move consistently.
Highest-Leverage Experiment: Begin every executive meeting with a ten-minute customer capability reflection.

Catalyst Reflection

We entered believing: Customer Focus was primarily a training issue.

We are leaving believing: Customer Focus is primarily a Capability System issue.

The most important insight: Reflection and measurement matter more than additional courses.

The capability is actually limited by: Weak knowledge movement, inconsistent reflection, and competing measures.

The most powerful experiment we could begin next week: Build customer reflection into existing management routines.

If this Capability System became significantly stronger: Customer-centered decisions would become routine across the enterprise.

SECTION IV

MAKE WORK A SOURCE OF CAPABILITY

Learning through experience

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