Capability Design Canvas™

Companion to Becoming a Catalyst | John Coné

Designing the systems through which organizational capability emerges, endures and evolves.

Purpose

The Capability Map makes a system visible. The Capability System Assessment helps us understand how well it is working. The Capability Design Canvas helps us deliberately design or redesign that system. The intervention is what we build; capability is what we hope will emerge.

Expand the unit of design from an intervention to the system surrounding it. Capability emerges through the interaction of Infrastructure, Experiences and Conditions, not through three independent design assignments.

When and how to use

Use for new or unsustainable capabilities, disappointing development investments or changes in work. Convene people who influence the system; define observable capability, design interactions, test a small combination of changes and refine it.

Think of Infrastructure, Experiences, and Conditions as a triangle, not three separate workstreams. The desired capability emerges through their interaction. An experiment makes those interactions visible; observation and reflection inform the next design. Ask what the organization will be able to do without another formal intervention.

This instrument supports Design, Convene and Reflect. Allow approximately 30–45 minutes for an initial design conversation (an estimate, not a tested duration). Keep the desired capability visible while designing the Infrastructure, Experiences and Conditions together.

A. Desired capability

What must the organization become able to do? Why does it matter? What observable evidence would demonstrate it?

B. Infrastructure

What existing tools, resources, technology, information, structures and connections should we retain or strengthen? What is missing? What should be embedded in work?

Consider shared language, measures and accessibility in the flow of work, including appropriate AI tools and information. Retain useful elements rather than assuming everything must be rebuilt.

C. Experiences

What experiences will develop capability? How can normal work become developmental? How will people practice, receive feedback, reflect and learn from others?

Consider observation, experimentation, stretch assignments, peer learning and knowledge movement. Design for the development of judgment, not merely the acquisition of information.

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D. Conditions

What conditions enable and sustain capability? What expectations, consequences, leadership behaviors, time, trust and boundaries should change?

Look at actual rather than espoused expectations and consequences. Consider psychological safety, recognition, collaboration and autonomy while preserving legitimate constraints.

E. Interactions and orchestration

How will Infrastructure, Experiences and Conditions reinforce one another? What contradictions or dependencies must we address? Who influences each element? Who needs to design together?

Examine each pair of elements for reinforcement and contradiction. A guide is unlikely to change behavior if leaders reward only speed; new expectations without practice can be frustrating. Talent rarely owns all the elements.

F. First experiment

What is the smallest useful combination of changes? What assumptions are we testing? What safeguards must remain? Who owns it, what evidence will we gather, and when will we review?

G. Continuous refinement

How will experience generate learning? How will discoveries travel and improve the system? Who can refine it? How will it become less dependent on the Catalyst?

Decide who can authorize changes, how discoveries will travel, and how outdated practices will be retired. The goal is capability that emerges, endures and becomes generative.

Working instrument

Capability: _____ Date: _____ Prepared by: _____

A. Desired capability

What must the organization become able to do? Why does it matter? What observable evidence would demonstrate it?

_____

B. Infrastructure

What existing tools, resources, technology, information, structures and connections should we retain or strengthen? What is missing? What should be embedded in work?

_____

C. Experiences

What experiences will develop capability? How can normal work become developmental? How will people practice, receive feedback, reflect and learn from others?

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D. Conditions

What conditions enable and sustain capability? What expectations, consequences, leadership behaviors, time, trust and boundaries should change?

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E. Interactions and orchestration

How will Infrastructure, Experiences and Conditions reinforce one another? What contradictions or dependencies must we address? Who influences each element? Who needs to design together?

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F. First experiment

What is the smallest useful combination of changes? What assumptions are we testing? What safeguards must remain? Who owns it, what evidence will we gather, and when will we review?

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G. Continuous refinement

How will experience generate learning? How will discoveries travel and improve the system? Who can refine it? How will it become less dependent on the Catalyst?

_____

Completed Example

The following example is illustrative, not a documented case.

A large organization asks Talent for a coaching program. Employees report that managers frequently solve problems for them. Talent convenes managers, employees, operations and HR to design a system that develops employee judgment, rather than beginning with a course.

A. Desired capability

Managers develop employees' judgment and ability to solve unfamiliar problems without unnecessary intervention.

B. Infrastructure

Shared language, practical conversation guides, approved AI support, appropriate employee information, peer connections and existing one-on-ones.

C. Experiences

Real-work coaching, observation with consent, peer consultation, stretch assignments, employee feedback, reflection and experimentation.

D. Conditions

Recognize development as part of work; provide time and permission, safe reflection and clear decision boundaries.

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E. Interactions and orchestration

Tools support practice; leadership expectations encourage use; feedback improves tools. Talent, operational leaders, managers, employees, HR and technology share responsibility.

F. First experiment

Eight managers in two units for six weeks; test guides, two recurring real-work situations, leader support, peer exchanges and employee feedback. Preserve urgent decision and safety boundaries.

G. Continuous refinement

Managers share discoveries, revise guides, examine exceptions and gradually own peer exchanges. Track employee solutions, independence, operational performance, adaptation and knowledge movement.

These are proposed measures, not reported results. The experiment should also reveal when direct intervention is appropriate and whether the system can continue to improve without Talent organizing every exchange.

The guide remains provisional. Operational leaders review performance expectations, and managers take ownership of peer exchanges. Evidence includes employees proposing solutions, teams addressing unfamiliar problems independently, operational performance being maintained or improved, adaptations spreading, and improvement continuing without Talent.

Interpreting and acting

Review observable capability, real work, reinforcing interactions, participation of system owners, safeguards, a manageable experiment and evidence of learning. Unanswered questions reveal assumptions to test, not a numerical score.

Capability System Design Review

Is the desired capability observable?

Do we understand the existing system?

Have we considered Infrastructure, Experiences, and Conditions?

Have we designed their interactions?

Is real work a source of development?

Are the people who influence the system involved?

Have we identified what to retain as well as what to change?

Is the first experiment manageable?

Have we preserved legitimate safeguards?

Will we gather evidence of capability rather than participation?

Will discoveries move and inform continuous refinement?

Will the system become less dependent on the Catalyst?

Use these questions for reflection and conversation, not as a scored or validated assessment.

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The design review is a conversation about the coherence of the system. Where an answer is uncertain, identify an assumption to test. Examine whether Infrastructure supports Experiences, whether Conditions permit those Experiences, and whether the resulting learning improves Infrastructure and Conditions.

Catalyst Watch For...

Starting with a predetermined intervention; separate lists rather than interactions; confusing availability with accessibility; ignoring contradictions; Talent owning everything; overdesigning; measuring participation instead of capability; treating AI as the system; permanent dependence on Talent.

Connections to other instruments

Capability Map, Capability System Assessment, Conversation Design Canvas, Experience Design Canvas, Learning Velocity Map and Accelerator Kit, Catalyst Reflection Journal. Knowledge Movement Map, Ignition Point Finder and Generative Conditions Audit.

The ultimate Catalyst question

Are we designing a system that produces a capability, or a system that becomes increasingly capable of producing capability?

Printable and editable companion materials: CatalystLeadershipTools.com.

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