Direct–Empower–Catalyze Diagnostic

Companion to Catalyst Leadership | *John Coné*

Construct the Leadership Response the Situation Requires

You have identified an ignition point. You have considered the conditions that need to change. Now comes a different question:

How should you lead?

Catalyst Leadership does not mean that Catalyze is always the right answer. Depending on the situation, the leader may need to direct, empower, catalyze, or combine these motions.

Consequential situations often require some combination of all three. The question is not: Which kind of leader am I? It is: What combination of Direct, Empower, and Catalyze does this situation require—and where, when, and to what degree should each apply?

REMEMBER THE THREE MOTIONS

DIRECT

I know what needs to happen; you need to do it. When the answer is sufficiently known and the situation requires reliable execution, the leader supplies or specifies much of the answer.

EMPOWER

The destination is reasonably clear; you have the authority, resources, and capability to determine how to get there. When the required outcome can be specified but the people doing the work should own significant choices about how to achieve it, the leader defines the outcome and boundaries but does not prescribe the path.

CATALYZE

Neither the solution nor perhaps the precise destination is fully knowable; create the conditions in which people can discover, experiment, connect, learn, and generate movement. When the situation requires discovery rather than primarily execution and the answer cannot simply be supplied in advance, the leader works on the conditions through which an answer can emerge.

THEN START WITH ONE QUESTION

Before working through the diagnostic, ask: Can the desired outcome be achieved primarily through compliance with the leader's answer?

YES: There may be a substantial role for Direct.

PARTLY: Some aspects may call for Direct or Empower while others require Catalyze.

NO: There is likely to be a substantial role for Catalyze.

But don't stop there. Test the situation. Here are five tests you can use:

TEST 1 — THE ANSWER TEST

How knowable is the answer?

Ask:

Is there a proven solution?

Have we solved this problem successfully before?

Does relevant expertise already exist?

Are cause and effect reasonably understood?

Is the challenge primarily one of execution?

Or are important parts of the problem itself still emerging?

Will we need to discover the answer through action?

Which statement best describes the situation?

1 — The answer is known and should largely be followed.

2 — Much of the answer is known, with some local adaptation required.

3 — The destination is reasonably clear, but there are several plausible ways to reach it.

4 — Important parts of both the path and the answer must be discovered.

5 — We are confronting something sufficiently unfamiliar that neither the answer nor perhaps the precise destination can be specified in advance.

Rating: _____

What do we actually know?

_____

What must still be discovered?

TEST 2 — THE CONSEQUENCE TEST

What are the consequences of getting it wrong?

Uncertainty does not automatically justify experimentation. Some situations contain boundaries that should not be discovered through trial and error.

Ask:

Could people be harmed?

Could we violate law, regulation, ethics, or fiduciary responsibility?

Could we create irreversible damage?

Could the organization incur unacceptable financial or reputational risk?

Which aspects of the situation require consistency?

Which aspects permit variation?

Can experimentation be made bounded, reversible, or safe?

Which statement best describes the situation?

1 — Error could produce severe or irreversible consequences; substantial control is required.

2 — Consequences are significant and tightly bounded discretion is appropriate.

3 — Some areas require control, while others permit responsible discretion.

4 — Most experimentation can be bounded and consequences contained.

5 — The cost of responsible experimentation is relatively low and learning from variation is valuable.

Rating: _____

What must be protected?

_____

Where is there responsible room for discovery?

TEST 3 — THE TIME TEST

How much time do we have to discover the answer?

Catalysis takes time. Sometimes the situation does not provide enough of it.

Ask:

Is immediate action required?

What happens if we wait?

Is there time for people to connect, experiment, and learn?

Could we direct an immediate response while preserving discovery for what follows?

Is urgency real—or merely habitual?

Which part must happen now?

Which part can remain open?

Which statement best describes the situation?

• Immediate coordinated action is required; there is little or no time for discovery before acting.

• Rapid action is required, with limited room for discretion.

• Some action must occur immediately, but meaningful questions can remain open.

• There is sufficient time for experimentation and learning.

• Discovery before commitment is both possible and valuable.

Rating: _____

What must happen now?

_____

What can be discovered over time?

TEST 4 — THE CAPABILITY-RETURN TEST

Could the way we address this situation increase generative capability?

Not every problem provides an equally valuable opportunity to build capability.

Ask:

• Is this kind of unfamiliar problem likely to recur?

• Could the capabilities developed here transfer elsewhere?

• Could people develop judgment they will need again?

• Could useful connections be created?

• Could learning from this situation travel?

• Could the organization become less dependent upon the leader or another central source of intelligence?

• Is there enough potential return to justify investing in discovery?

Which statement best describes the situation?

• There is little meaningful capability return from using this situation for discovery.

• Some learning may occur, but its value beyond this problem is limited.

• Useful capability could be developed and reused.

• Solving this problem through discovery could substantially strengthen capability elsewhere.

• This is an unusually valuable opportunity to build generative capability while solving consequential work.

Rating: _____

What capability could this situation help create?

_____

Where else could that capability matter?

TEST 5 — THE ACCOUNTABILITY TEST

Where must accountability ultimately reside?

Distributed intelligence does not eliminate accountability.

Ask:

Who is accountable for the outcome?

What decisions can legitimately be distributed?

Which decisions cannot?

What authority can move?

What responsibility remains with the leader regardless of who generates the answer?

Are there decisions that require a named individual to decide?

Can discovery be distributed even when final accountability cannot?

Which statement best describes the situation?

• Accountability requires the leader or another designated authority to retain substantial decision control.

• Significant authority must remain centralized, though input can be distributed.

• Accountability can be retained while meaningful decision authority is distributed.

• Most decisions can appropriately reside with those closest to discovery.

• Both discovery and substantial decision authority can responsibly be distributed.

Rating: _____

What accountability must remain centralized?

_____

What authority can responsibly move?

LOOK AT THE PATTERN

Record the five ratings.

DON'T ADD THE SCORES

The purpose is not to calculate whether you should Direct, Empower, or Catalyze. Averages can hide precisely what will make the greatest difference. A situation might score high on discovery but contain one high-consequence boundary that requires firm direction. Or immediate urgency might require direction today even though the larger problem requires catalysis tomorrow.

Instead, examine the pattern.

LOOK FOR THE CATALYST EXCEPTION

Begin with the possibility that consequential work can also build generative capability.

Then ask whether the five tests establish boundaries around that opportunity.

A Catalyst Exception exists when one or more conditions are substantial enough that Direct or Empower should govern some or all of the situation.

Does the Answer Test require greater direction?

YES / NO / IN PART

Where?

_____

Does the Consequence Test require greater direction?

YES / NO / IN PART

Where?

_____

Does the Time Test require greater direction?

YES / NO / IN PART

Where?

_____

Does the Capability-Return Test suggest little reason to catalyze?

YES / NO / IN PART

Where?

_____

Does the Accountability Test require authority to remain centralized?

YES / NO / IN PART

Where?

DON'T CHOOSE A MOTION. CONSTRUCT A RESPONSE.

The most important outcome of this diagnostic may be discovering that the situation should not be treated as one thing.

A single problem can contain:

Something that must be directed.

Something that should be empowered.

Something that needs to be catalyzed.

Use the following questions to construct the response.

WHERE SHOULD WE DIRECT?

Ask:

What is sufficiently known, consequential, urgent, or accountability-bound that the leader should specify what must happen?

We will Direct:

Because:

WHERE SHOULD WE EMPOWER?

Ask:

Where is the outcome sufficiently clear that responsibility can move to others, while allowing them to determine how it should be achieved?

We will Empower:

Because:

WHERE SHOULD WE CATALYZE?

Ask:

Where does the answer need to emerge through connection, experimentation, judgment, learning, or discovery?

We will Catalyze:

Because:

PRESERVE GENERATIVE SPACE

Now look at the parts you intend to Direct.

Ask one more question: Am I directing more of the situation than the situation actually requires?

A leader may need to specify a boundary without specifying the answer, to set a deadline without determining the method, or to protect a nonnegotiable standard without controlling every decision. In some situations the leader may need specify the result without prescribing the path or to intervene immediately in a crisis without deciding how the organization will prevent the next one. So ask:

What must be fixed?

_____

What can remain open?

_____

What can others still discover?

_____

This is generative space.

Protect as much of it as the situation responsibly permits.

DIRECT NOW. CATALYZE LATER.

Some situations require immediate direction.

That does not mean the entire problem should remain directed.

Ask:

After the immediate need is addressed, what should become a discovery question?

For example:

A cybersecurity incident may require immediate compliance with an established response protocol.

Later, the organization can catalyze discovery around:

• Why the vulnerability existed.

• What signals were missed.

• What new capabilities are required.

• How learning should travel.

• How the system could detect unfamiliar threats earlier.

• Direct may solve the immediate problem.

That catalysis can change what the organization becomes capable of doing next.

CATALYZE NOW. DIRECT LATER.

The reverse can also be true. Discovery may be required first. But once the organization learns enough, variation may no longer be useful.

Ask: What are we currently trying to discover that may eventually need to become a standard, rule, process, or requirement?

Catalysis is not an obligation to preserve uncertainty forever. Once an answer becomes sufficiently known, reliable, and consequential, leadership may appropriately shift toward Empower or Direct.

CONSTRUCT YOUR LEADERSHIP RESPONSE

Complete the following.

We will DIRECT:

_____

We will EMPOWER:

_____

We will CATALYZE:

_____

We will preserve discovery around:

_____

We will not permit variation around:

_____

We expect the leadership motion to change when:

STATE THE RESPONSE IN ONE SENTENCE

We will Direct _____, Empower _____, and Catalyze _____, because _____.

If you cannot complete that sentence clearly, you may still be treating the situation too broadly.

THE DIAGNOSTIC IN PRACTICE

Return once more to the regional pricing example.

The organization has identified this ignition point:

Make distributed experience accessible at the moment unfamiliar judgment is required.

And it has identified several conditions that need to change.

Now ask how leaders should lead the change.

THE ANSWER TEST — 4

The organization knows its pricing economics and required financial boundaries.

But it cannot prescribe the right answer for every unfamiliar customer situation.

Some judgment must be developed through experience.

Implication: Significant room for Catalyze.

THE CONSEQUENCE TEST — 3

Some pricing decisions could create meaningful financial or contractual consequences.

Not everything should be experimental.

But bounded discretion is possible.

Implication: Direct the boundaries; preserve discovery within them.

THE TIME TEST — 4

Customer decisions often need to be made quickly, but the organization has time to improve how experience and expertise become available.

Implication: Empower immediate judgment while catalyzing improvement in the larger system.

THE CAPABILITY-RETURN TEST — 5

The opportunity extends well beyond pricing.

If managers become better at finding relevant experience, connecting with expertise, interpreting enterprise context, and exercising unfamiliar judgment, those capabilities can add value in many other situations.

Implication: Strong reason to Catalyze.

THE ACCOUNTABILITY TEST — 3

The company must retain accountability for pricing discipline and contractual commitments.

But that does not require headquarters to make every unusual pricing decision.

Implication: Preserve central accountability for boundaries while distributing substantial decision authority.

THE CONSTRUCTED RESPONSE

DIRECT

Define nonnegotiable financial, legal, and contractual boundaries.

EMPOWER

Give regional managers authority to make customer decisions within those boundaries.

CATALYZE

Create the conditions through which managers can find analogous experience, connect with relevant expertise, learn from one another's decisions, and improve judgment over time.

The resulting leadership response is not:

Catalyze instead of Direct.

It is:

Direct what must be fixed. Empower what others can own. Catalyze what must be discovered.

And revisit the combination as the situation changes.

That is Catalyst Judgment.

The Catalyst Leader does not merely choose a leadership motion.

The Catalyst Leader constructs a leadership response.

ACT

Intervene with judgment; do not turn the tools into the work

Choose and carry out the leadership response. Direct what must be fixed or protected; empower what others can own; catalyze what must be discovered. The objective is not to use Catalyze in every situation. It is to meet the obligation in front of you while recognizing opportunities to leave useful capability behind.

Before acting: What result must be delivered? What risks or boundaries are nonnegotiable? Is there a worthwhile and responsible generative return? If not, act appropriately without inventing one.

© 2026 John Coné. All rights reserved. Permission is granted to individuals and organizations to download, reproduce, distribute internally, and adapt this resource for their own professional development and internal organizational use, provided that attribution to John Coné and CatalystLeadershipTools.com is retained. Commercial resale, commercial redistribution, and incorporation into products or services offered for sale require prior written permission from the copyright holder.