Capability Extraction Canvas

Companion to Catalyst Leadership | John Coné

What did the work teach us—and what can we now do?

What Did the Work Teach Us—and What Can We Now Do That We Could Not Do Before?

This is a tool for reflection. It is used when the action has been taken. Perhaps the problem was solved or the opportunity captured. Maybe the intervention worked only partially, or maybe it failed. Whatever happened, the work produced experience that can be examined for learning.

But experience does not guarantee learning. Learning does not guarantee capability. And capability created in one place does not automatically become available somewhere else. The Catalyst Leader therefore asks: What capability can we extract from this experience before we move on?

This is not simply an after-action review. The purpose is not merely to understand what happened. It is to convert experience into capability that can be used again, adapted, combined with other knowledge, and potentially contribute to capabilities the organization does not yet know it will need.

1. START WITH THE EXPERIENCE

Describe the consequential work you just completed—or have taken far enough to learn from.

• What were we trying to accomplish?

• What did we actually do?

• What happened?

• What surprised us?

Start with what happened, not with the story you expected to tell about it.

2. WHAT DID WE LEARN?

Experience becomes useful only when it changes something about what we understand. To test that, we can ask:

• What do we understand now that we did not understand before?

• Which assumptions proved correct?

• Which assumptions proved wrong?

• What did we discover about the problem?

• What did we discover about the system?

• What did we learn about customers, employees, technology, partners, competitors, or the environment?

• What did we learn about how decisions get made?

• What did we learn from what did not work?

• What surprised us enough that we should reconsider something we previously believed?

We learned:

The most important thing we learned was:

_____

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Because it changes how we think about:

DON'T CONFUSE RESULTS WITH LEARNING

“We succeeded” is a result. “We failed” is a result. But neither tells you what you learned. A successful intervention can produce little learning if nobody understands why it worked. A failed intervention can produce enormous learning if it reveals something important about the system.

To maximize learning, ask:

What do we know now that should change what we do next?

3. WHAT CAN WE NOW DO?

Learning becomes capability when it changes the organization's ability to act. To identify what capability actually emerged, ask:

• What can people now do that they could not do before?

• What can they do better, faster, or with less dependence?

• What judgment has improved?

• What new decision can now be made?

• What problem can now be addressed?

• What can people now recognize earlier?

• What connections can now be made more readily?

• What can technology or an agent now enable that was previously difficult?

• What combination of human and technological capability now exists that did not exist before?

Complete the sentence:

Because of this experience, we are now better able to…

What evidence do we have that this is actually a capability—not merely something we learned about?

THE CAPABILITY TEST

Before calling something a capability, ask: Could we act differently because of it? If not, you may have valuable learning—but you do not yet have capability.

LEARNING

We now understand:

_____

CAPABILITY

We can now:

_____

It is a valuable distinction.

Learning changes what we know. Capability changes what we can do.

4. WHERE DOES THE CAPABILITY CURRENTLY LIVE?

New capability often exists before the organization recognizes that it exists. But it may be fragile. It may live:

- In one person's judgment.
- In one team.
- In a relationship between two people.
- In an informal network.
- In a new routine.
- In a process.
- In data.
- In technology.
- In an AI agent or other tool.
- In a combination of people and technology.
- In an undocumented workaround.
- In the experience of someone nobody thought to ask.

To help find it, ask:

Where does this capability actually reside today?

Who can currently access it?

_____

Who cannot?

_____

What happens if the people who developed it leave, move, or forget?

5. WHAT SHOULD TRAVEL?

Not everything learned needs to be standardized, documented, or distributed to everyone. But potentially valuable learning should not remain trapped simply because the experience that produced it occurred locally.

To help you decide, ask:

- Who else could benefit from what we learned?
- Where else might a similar situation arise?
- Who is working on a problem that could benefit from this experience?
- What part of the learning is sufficiently developed to share?
- What remains uncertain but might still be useful to others?
- What would someone elsewhere need in order to make intelligent use of it?
- How could someone discover this learning when they need it?

What should travel?

_____

To whom?

_____

Why would it matter to them?

_____

How could they find it when they need it?

DON'T WAIT UNTIL THE KNOWLEDGE IS FINISHED

Some of the most valuable organizational knowledge is unfinished. It could be:

- An unexpected result.
- A weak signal.
- A failed experiment.
- A promising hypothesis.
- A customer reaction.
- An unresolved question.
- A partial solution.
- A surprising connection.

If unfinished knowledge cannot travel, other people may have to rediscover it from scratch.

Ask:

What are we learning that may be useful elsewhere even though we do not yet fully understand it?

How can we make that learning visible without pretending it is more certain than it is?

6. WHAT COULD RECOMBINE?

Learning becomes more powerful when it encounters other learning. To help you see those possibilities, ask:

What other expertise could combine with what we learned?

Who elsewhere has solved part of this problem?

What capability already exists that could combine with this one?

Could experience from another function, geography, customer group, technology, or industry change what this capability becomes?

Could technology connect knowledge or experience that people would not otherwise know existed?

What happens if this learning travels into a context different from the one that produced it?

This capability might become more valuable if combined with:

People, teams, technologies, or experiences we should connect it with:

7. WHAT WOULD MAKE THE CAPABILITY USABLE AGAIN?

A capability has limited value if it can be exercised only by the people who created it under the exact conditions in which it emerged. Ask:

- What context would someone else need?
- What principles matter more than the specific procedure?
- What should be documented?
- What should be demonstrated?
- What must be practiced rather than explained?
- What requires judgment?

• What should become a routine or process?

• What should remain adaptable?

• What could be embedded in technology?

• What requires continued human judgment?

• What would allow someone to use this capability without depending upon the original problem solvers?

To make this capability usable again, we should:

But we should avoid:

DON'T TURN EVERY LESSON INTO A PROCESS

Extracting capability does not necessarily mean codifying it.

Sometimes the wrong response to learning is to convert it immediately into a rule, a procedure, or a checklist. Not every lesson belongs in a course, a policy, a knowledge repository, or a technology platform.

Those may be useful. But ask first: What are we trying to preserve—the answer, or the ability to produce good answers? If the situation is likely to repeat in essentially the same form, preserving the answer may be valuable.

If future situations are likely to differ, preserving the judgment, connections, learning mechanisms, and ability to recombine knowledge may be more important.

What should become repeatable?

_____

What should remain adaptable?

8. WHAT NEW ACTION SHOULD THIS ENABLE?

Capability becomes demonstrable through use. A key question to ask is: Where could we deliberately use what we have developed next?

Do not wait passively for the next identical problem. Look for a new situation where the capability could be exercised, tested, adapted, or combined with something else.

A next opportunity to use this capability is:

_____

It is different from the original situation because:

_____

FIELD GUIDE ACTION SHORTHAND | Applying the cycle

Experience → Learning → Capability → New Action → New Experience

Here “new action” is the practical use of capability; it corresponds to “performance” in Chapter 10. The shorthand does not replace the additional travel-and-recombination step required for generativity.

CLOSE THE LOOP

The cycle is:

EXPERIENCE → LEARNING → CAPABILITY → NEW ACTION → NEW EXPERIENCE

But none of those arrows is automatic.

EXPERIENCE

What happened?

_____

LEARNING

What changed in our understanding?

_____

CAPABILITY

What can we now do that we could not reliably do before?

_____

TRAVEL

Where else should the learning or capability become available?

_____

RECOMBINATION

What could it connect with to become something more?

_____

NEW ACTION

Where will we use it next?

THE EXTRACTION QUESTION

Before closing the work, ask:

If we simply move on now, what capability created through this experience will we leave trapped inside it?

Then ask:

What is the smallest action we can take now to prevent that from happening?

WHAT DID THE WORK LEAVE BEHIND?

Complete these four sentences.

Because we did this work, we learned:

_____

Because we learned it, we can now:

_____

We will make that capability available by:

_____

We will exercise it next by:

_____

The problem or opportunity may have been the reason the work began. It need not be the only thing the work produces. Don't just solve the problem. Extract capability from it.

THE NEXT QUESTION

You have identified capability that emerged from the work, but not all capability is the same. You may have become better able to repeat something you now know how to do. Or you may have increased the organization's capacity to confront situations whose answers are not yet known.

Those are different outcomes. The next reflective question is: What kind of capability did we actually create?

That is the purpose of the Enduring vs. Generative Capability Test.

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