Catalyst Spotter & Builder

Companion to Catalyst Leadership | *John Coné*

Recognize behavior; create developmental opportunity; multiply Catalysts

Who Is Already Behaving Like a Catalyst—and How Can You Help Them Become More Capable?

Catalysts are not confined to leadership positions. They may be found anywhere in the organization. They are not necessarily the most charismatic people, the most senior people, the recognized innovators, or the people with the deepest expertise. Often they become most visible when the answer is not obvious.

Look for people who help others make sense of unfamiliar situations, connect knowledge that was previously separate, mobilize people around an emerging need, create useful experiments, turn experience into learning, and help that learning travel.

In other words, watch what people do when the map runs out, then use what you observe to create developmental opportunities. The purpose of this tool is not to identify a special class of people and label them "Catalysts." It is to recognize catalytic behavior and deliberately create opportunities for more of it to develop.

BEGIN WITH CONSEQUENTIAL WORK

Think about a recent situation in which:

- The answer was not obvious.
- Existing routines were insufficient.
- Several perspectives were required.
- Circumstances changed unexpectedly.
- People had to learn while acting.
- A new capability had to emerge.

The situation:

_____

Why was the answer not obvious?

_____

Now ask:

Who helped create movement when the answer was not already known? List several people if appropriate. Do not begin with job titles. Begin with behavior.

OBSERVE CATALYTIC BEHAVIOR

Rather than completing six separate observation worksheets, record evidence in one place. Look for what people actually did when the answer was not obvious—not their position, charisma, or visibility.

SEE — Who surfaced a signal, challenged an assumption, or reframed the system?

Person: _____ Behavior/effect: _____

CONNECT — Who brought together previously disconnected knowledge or people?

Person: _____ Behavior/effect: _____

MOBILIZE — Who enabled others to act without unnecessary orchestration?

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Person: _____ Behavior/effect: _____

EXPERIMENT / DISCOVER — Who opened inquiry, framed a useful experiment, or legitimized uncertainty?

Person: _____ Behavior/effect: _____

LEARN — Who converted experience into insight and changed action?

Person: _____ Behavior/effect: _____

SPREAD — Who helped learning travel, adapt, or develop others?

Person: _____ Behavior/effect: _____

LOOK FOR THE PATTERN

Now step back.

Who appeared repeatedly?

_____

What catalytic behaviors did that person demonstrate?

Which behaviors appear to be strengths?

_____

Which are less developed?

_____

Do not add scores.

Do not create a ranking.

You are looking for evidence of catalytic behavior—not assigning people a Catalyst score.

DON'T CONFUSE CATALYTIC BEHAVIOR WITH PERSONALITY

Be especially careful not to substitute familiar leadership signals for catalytic behavior.

A potential Catalyst is not necessarily:

- Charismatic.
- Extroverted.
- Highly visible.
- Senior.
- A designated high potential.
- An innovation specialist.
- The person who speaks first.
- The person with the answer.
- The strongest advocate for change.

In fact, pay particular attention to people who increase the capability and agency of the system without making themselves the center of it. Ask: Who contributed disproportionately to movement but might be overlooked by our usual talent processes?

Why might we overlook them?

LOOK FOR DEPENDENCE

There is another important distinction. A person may appear catalytic because everyone turns to that person whenever something difficult occurs. That can indicate unusual capability. But it can also create dependence.

Ask: Does this person make other people more capable—or simply become the person everyone needs?

Evidence that the person increases others' capability:

_____

_____

Evidence that the system may be becoming dependent upon the person:

_____

_____

A Catalyst does more than solve difficult problems. A Catalyst increases the system's capacity to solve difficult problems.

NOW SHIFT FROM SPOTTING TO BUILDING

You have observed someone demonstrating catalytic behavior. Do not begin by sending that person to a Catalyst Leadership course. Begin with work. Ask: What consequential, unfamiliar work would give this person an opportunity to develop the next level of catalytic capability?

Catalysts develop by working on situations where:

- The answer is not already known.
- Multiple perspectives are required.
- Existing routines are insufficient.
- Judgment is essential.
- Learning must occur while acting.
- The person cannot succeed merely by exercising authority.

A developmental opportunity:

_____

_____

Why is it appropriate?

_____

_____

CHOOSE THE DEVELOPMENTAL EDGE

Do not try to develop everything at once.

Based on what you observed, where would greater capability have the most value?

☐ See the system

☐ Find leverage

☐ Change conditions

☐ Work productively with uncertainty

☐ Mobilize without taking over

☐ Help experience become learning

☐ Help learning travel and recombine

☐ Increase other people's agency

☐ Use human and technological intelligence effectively

The developmental edge I would emphasize is:

_____

_____

Why?

_____

_____

USE A PROGRESSION OF RESPONSIBILITY

Development should progressively reduce dependence upon you.

A useful progression is:

WATCH HOW I APPROACH THIS

then:

LET'S CATALYZE TOGETHER

then:

YOU CATALYZE; I'LL HELP

then:

YOU CATALYZE

and ultimately:

YOU HELP SOMEONE ELSE LEARN TO CATALYZE

Where is this person today?

_____

_____

What would the next step look like?

_____

_____

DON'T TEACH ONLY THE ANSWER

When coaching the person, resist the temptation to supply your own answer before the person has had an opportunity to exercise judgment.

Instead ask questions such as:

• What do you think the system is producing here?

• What are we assuming?

• Where might the leverage be?

- What would need to become true for movement to occur?
- What should be fixed and what should remain open to discovery?
- Who else needs to be connected?
- What could we learn cheaply and quickly?
- How could solving this leave more capability behind?
- What are you doing that someone else could increasingly do?
- The question this person most needs to learn to ask:

GIVE FEEDBACK ON EFFECT, NOT STYLE

After the experience, discuss what happened.

Ask:

What movement did you help create?

_____

What did others become able to do?

_____

What did the system learn?

_____

What became less dependent upon you?

_____

What would you do differently next time?

_____

This keeps the conversation focused on catalytic effect rather than imitation of another leader's style.

MULTIPLY, DON'T CERTIFY

Be cautious about creating Catalyst badges, certifications, elite groups, special job families, or lists of officially designated Catalysts. Those approaches can unintentionally turn a distributed capability into another organizational category. The objective is not to identify a small number of Catalysts; it is to increase catalytic capability throughout the system.

Ask: Who is this person now helping become more catalytic?

If development stops with the individual, multiplication has not yet occurred.

THE TALENT QUESTION

Every leader can spot and build Catalysts, but the Talent function can help make that development systemic rather than episodic.

Ask:

- Where does consequential unfamiliar work occur?
- Who gets access to it?
- Do talent processes recognize catalytic behavior?
- Do succession processes overvalue people who personally deliver answers?

• Do development experiences expose people to genuine uncertainty?

• Are people rewarded for building capability in others?

• Can talent marketplaces connect emerging Catalysts with appropriate work?

• Are we learning which experiences actually develop catalytic capability?

One way our talent system could make Catalyst development more systemic is:

_____

_____

THE CATALYST BUILDER COMMITMENT

Complete:

The person whose catalytic capability I want to develop is:

_____

The behavior I have observed is:

_____

The next capability I want to help develop is:

_____

The consequential work through which it can develop is:

_____

My role will be:

_____

I will know I am succeeding when:

_____

And finally:

Who might this person eventually help become a Catalyst?

_____

The strongest evidence that you developed a Catalyst is not that the person becomes indispensable.

It is that the person increasingly helps other people and systems become capable of movement without requiring someone to orchestrate every move.

Don't build followers of Catalyst Leadership. Build more people capable of catalyzing.

And that leads us to the Leader Disappearance Test.

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