Ten Questions to Ask Your Talent Leader

Executive Guide to Leading Catalysts | Chapter 6

What follows is not a script.

Please don't take these ten questions to your next meeting with your Talent leader and work through them one by one. I suspect neither of you would enjoy the experience. Think of them instead as questions worth having available. Some will fit a particular situation. Others won't. You may already ask several of them in different words. And you will undoubtedly have questions of your own that accomplish the same purpose. What matters is not the precise wording. It is the kind of conversation the question invites.

1. WHAT ARE YOU SEEING THAT YOU THINK WE SHOULD BE PAYING ATTENTION TO?

This may be the most important question on the list. It gives your Talent leader permission to bring you something you did not ask for: a pattern, an emerging issue, an unexpected development, or an opportunity. It says: I expect you to notice.

What this can reveal: Something that has not yet made its way onto the executive agenda.

2. WHAT MIGHT WE BE MISSING ABOUT THIS PROBLEM?

By the time a problem reaches the Talent function, it may already have a label: a skills problem, a manager problem, a leadership problem, an engagement problem. This question reopens the diagnosis. It says: I am willing to reconsider the way we have framed the issue.

What this can reveal: A different cause—and possibly a very different solution.

3. WHO ELSE SEES A PIECE OF THIS THAT WE SHOULD HEAR?

No one person sees an organizational problem completely. This question asks the Talent professional to think across functions, levels, geographies, and perspectives. It says: Help us see more of the system before we act.

What this can reveal: People who should be part of the conversation but aren't.

4. WHAT DO WE ALREADY KNOW OR HAVE THAT WE AREN'T USING?

Before we buy, build, hire, or create, we should look around. Someone may already have expertise. Another group may have solved a similar problem. A previous effort may have produced useful learning. A practice may exist that simply has not traveled. It says: Don't assume the answer has to be new.

What this can reveal: Capability the organization already possesses but is not using.

5. WHERE IS SOMETHING WORKING THAT WE COULD LEARN FROM?

Organizations are often better at finding problems than finding exceptions to them. If manager effectiveness is weak overall, who has unusually effective managers? If adoption of a new technology is slow, where is it moving quickly? If a capability is scarce, where does it already exist? It says: Look for evidence of what is possible.

What this can reveal: A promising practice, experience, or approach worth understanding.

6. WHAT CONNECTION COULD WE MAKE THAT MIGHT HELP?

Sometimes the next useful action isn't a program or an initiative. It is an introduction. Two people. Two teams. A business problem and someone with relevant experience. An executive with a question and a manager who sees the issue close to the work. It says: Before we create something, consider what might happen if we connect what is already here.

What this can reveal: A faster, simpler way forward.

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7. WHAT COULD WE TRY BEFORE WE MAKE A BIGGER COMMITMENT?

Not every uncertain problem requires a complete solution. A pilot, experiment, prototype, conversation, or small change may tell us something important before we commit significant money or time. It says: Help us learn before we scale.

What this can reveal: A lower-cost way to reduce uncertainty.

8. WHAT ARE WE LEARNING FROM THE WORK THAT IS ALREADY HAPPENING?

The organization produces experience every day. Projects succeed. Pilots fail. Customers surprise us. Managers improvise. People adopt technologies in ways nobody planned. Teams solve problems. But experience becomes organizational capability only if someone notices what was learned and helps make it useful. It says: The work itself should be teaching us.

What this can reveal: Learning we have already paid for but may be allowing to disappear.

9. IF THIS WORKS, WHAT WILL THE BUSINESS BE BETTER ABLE TO DO?

This question moves the conversation beyond the activity. A program can be launched successfully. An initiative can be completed on time. Participants can rate an experience highly. But what changed? What can people now do better, faster, differently, or more independently? It says: The outcome we care about is capability, not activity.

What this can reveal: Whether the proposed work is connected clearly enough to a business result.

10. WHAT ARE WE GOING TO BE ABLE TO DO OURSELVES NEXT TIME?

This is likely the most demanding question on the list. If the Talent department helps solve the problem, what remains after it steps away? Can managers now handle something they could not handle before? Can the team run the process? Can people find the expertise themselves? Can the business solve the next version of the problem with less outside help? It says: Success includes what no longer requires the Talent department.

What this can reveal: Whether the work is building capability or dependency.

YOUR HIGH LEVEL EXECUTIVE VIEW

Look back over the ten questions.

Which of these do I already ask?

_____

_____

Which question would produce a conversation I am probably not having today?

_____

_____

Which question might be most valuable in a business issue we are dealing with right now?

_____

_____

What question would I add to this list?

_____

_____

Notice What the Questions Are About

There is something I hope you noticed. Very few of these questions are really about the Talent function. They are about the business.

What are we seeing?

What are we missing?

What do we already know?

Who should we connect?

What are we learning?

What will we be able to do?

That is intentional. Catalyst Talent professionals are not trying to make the Talent function more central to the organization. In many ways, they are trying to do the opposite. They are trying to make the organization's capability more central to the conversation.

And notice the repeated use of we. These aren't questions an executive hands to the Talent department with the instruction, “Go figure this out.” They invite the Talent professional into a shared examination of a business issue. That may be one of the most important changes we are exploring. The relationship begins to move from: Here's what I need you to do. toward: Here's something we need to understand. What do you see? There will still be plenty of occasions for the first conversation. The new standard is And.

Try One

So here is an experiment. Before your next substantive conversation with a Talent leader, choose one question from the ten that you don't normally ask. Don't announce that you are conducting an experiment. Don't explain the Catalyst concept. Just ask the question. And then resist the temptation to fill the silence. Listen to the answer. Ask a follow-up if something interests you.

Pay attention not only to what you learn, but to what happens to the conversation. You may discover that your Talent leader has been seeing things you haven't been asking about. You may discover that the first answer is not especially interesting. That's useful information too.

And you may find that asking the question once isn't enough. If people have spent years learning that you want answers, solutions, and delivery, one different question may not immediately persuade them that you also want observations, possibilities, connections, and unfinished thinking. Expectations change through repetition.

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