Catalyst Field Notes™

Companion to Becoming a Catalyst | *John Coné*

Capturing What May Matter Before You Know That It Matters

Catalysts notice before they know.

Purpose

Organizations continuously produce signals about what is changing. A manager asks an unusual question. A team develops a workaround. A community begins solving problems without being asked. The same complaint surfaces in three unrelated conversations. Employees begin using a technology in a way its designers never anticipated. A capability that seemed unimportant six months ago suddenly appears everywhere. Most of these observations disappear.

The Catalyst Field Notes provide a simple discipline for capturing them.

The purpose is not to determine immediately what an observation means. It is to preserve potentially important evidence long enough to discover whether it is isolated—or part of an emerging pattern.

The Basic Discipline

When something catches your attention, capture six things.

1. What did I observe?

Describe what actually happened. **Avoid interpretation at first.** What did someone say or do? What changed? What was unusual?

Observation

_____

2. Why did I notice it?

What made this stand out?

□ Unexpected
□ Repeated
□ Different from past practice
□ Contradicted an assumption
□ Appeared in several places
□ Produced an unusual result
□ Someone else called attention to it
□ I can't explain why—but it stood out

Why it caught my attention

_____

3. What evidence do I have? Record enough context to distinguish an observation from an impression.

Where did I see/hear it?

_____

Who or what was involved?

_____

Have I observed it before?

□ First observation
□ Occasionally
□ Several times
□ Becoming common

4. What might it mean? List possibilities rather than reaching a conclusion.

Possible explanation #1

_____

Possible explanation #2

_____

Another explanation I shouldn't dismiss

_____

This last prompt forces the Catalyst to resist turning the first plausible explanation into "the answer." Occam's Razor is great until it isn't.

5. Which Catalyst Lens Might This Touch? An observation may relate to several.

Moving Knowledge

□ Knowledge moved unexpectedly
□ Knowledge became trapped
□ Someone connected previously disconnected knowledge
□ A community or network played an important role
□ AI changed how knowledge moved

Note:

_____

_____

Capability Systems

□ Infrastructure helped or hindered capability
□ An important experience developed capability
□ Organizational conditions affected capability
□ Several system elements reinforced one another
□ A bottleneck became visible

Note:

_____

_____

Learning Velocity

□ Reflection accelerated learning
□ Reflection was missing
□ An insight spread unusually quickly
□ Experimentation occurred

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□ Adoption stalled
□ A practice was refined
□ Learning became capability

Note:

_____

_____

Emergence

□ New capability need
□ New behavior
□ New role
□ New practice
□ New use of technology/AI
□ New expectation
□ Weak signal worth watching

Note:

_____

_____

6. What Should I Do With This Observation?

Not every observation requires action. That is part of the discipline.

□ **Record only** — Interesting, but no reason yet to pursue it.

□ **Watch** — Look for additional evidence.

□ **Ask** — Explore it in future conversations.

□ **Connect** — Find out whether others are seeing the same thing.

□ **Investigate** — Gather more deliberate evidence.

□ **Experiment** — The observation suggests something worth testing.

□ **Elevate** — This may deserve inclusion in the Capability Outlook or executive discussion.

Next step, if any

_____

The One-Minute Field Note

Most Field Notes should probably be much shorter than the full form. When time is limited:

I noticed…

_____

It caught my attention because…

_____

It might mean…

_____

I should watch for…

_____

That's enough. The goal is to preserve the observation—not turn every interesting moment into an analytical exercise.

From Observations to Patterns

Individual Field Notes are clues. Their real value emerges when you periodically review them together. Consider a short review every few weeks. Don't ask: *What did I write down?* Ask: **What keeps showing up?** Look particularly for:

REPETITION
The same observation appears in different places.

CONVERGENCE
Different observations point toward the same underlying issue.

CONTRADICTION
Evidence doesn't fit the prevailing organizational story.

ACCELERATION
Something once unusual is appearing more frequently.

CONNECTION
Two things previously regarded as unrelated may influence one another.

ABSENCE
Something you expected to observe isn't happening.

POSITIVE DEVIANCE
Someone is achieving unusually good results in an unexpected way.

LANGUAGE CHANGE
People begin describing work, problems, or possibilities differently.

Language change may be particularly important because shifts in conversation can precede shifts in behavior.

Pattern Record

When several Field Notes begin to connect, create a Pattern Record.

Emerging Pattern

_____

Observations supporting it

_____

_____

_____

_____

Observations that contradict it

_____

_____

Our current hypothesis

_____

Confidence

□ Weak signal
□ Emerging pattern
□ Strong pattern
□ Established condition

What evidence would strengthen or weaken this interpretation?

_____

Where might this pattern matter?

□ Moving Knowledge
□ Capability Systems
□ Learning Velocity
□ Strategic capability
□ Emerging capability
□ Leadership
□ Talent
□ Other: _____

NOTE: Field Notes Can Contribute to the Capability Outlook

The progression is:

OBSERVATION

Something caught my attention.

↓

FIELD NOTE

I preserved the observation without overinterpreting it.

↓

PATTERN

Related observations began accumulating.

↓

INTERPRETATION

We developed and tested possible explanations.

↓

CAPABILITY OUTLOOK

The pattern became significant enough to bring into the organization's continuing conversation about capability.

That gives us a practical answer to a question the Capability Outlook otherwise leaves unanswered:

Where do the observations in the Outlook come from?

They come, at least in part, from disciplined noticing.

Catalyst Watch For…

There are several traps in keeping Field Notes.

Confirmation bias.
Recording only evidence that supports something you already believe.

Premature pattern recognition.
Two observations do not necessarily constitute a trend.

Interpretation disguised as observation.

Instead of: "Managers don't value reflection." Record: "Three project reviews ended without discussing what the team had learned."

Only recording problems.
Unexpected success may reveal more about emerging capability than failure does.

Collecting without revisiting.
Field Notes that are never reviewed become an archive rather than an observation system.

Turning everything into action.
Catalysts must be comfortable noticing something without immediately doing something about it.

A Completed Mini-Example

I noticed...

Three managers from unrelated functions independently asked Talent for help creating coaching routines rather than requesting training programs.

It caught my attention because...

Six months ago, comparable requests would almost certainly have been framed as training needs.

Evidence

Three conversations over four weeks: Operations, Finance, Customer Service.

No apparent coordination among the managers.

It might mean...

Managers may be beginning to see capability development as something embedded in work rather than delivered through programs.

Another explanation...

Talent may simply have recently communicated more about coaching, influencing the language managers use.

Catalyst lenses

Capability Systems: Manager behavior may be becoming part of the development infrastructure.

Learning Velocity: Coaching could shorten the distance between experience and reflection.

Emergence: Possible shift in managers' conception of their role.

What I'll do

Watch + Ask.

Listen for similar requests during the next month and ask managers why they chose coaching rather than training.

Periodic Catalyst Reflection

Every month or quarter, review the Field Notes and ask:

What am I seeing now that I wasn't seeing before?

Which signals have disappeared?

Which weak signals are becoming patterns?

Which assumptions are the evidence beginning to challenge?

Where is knowledge moving differently?

Where does capability seem to be emerging without deliberate intervention?

Where is learning accelerating—or repeatedly stalling?

What deserves to enter the next Capability Outlook?

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