Catalyst Questions™

Companion to Becoming a Catalyst | John Coné

Helping Organizations Think Better Together

Purpose

Catalysts ask a lot of questions.

But asking more questions does not necessarily produce better thinking.

A Catalyst Question is purposeful. It is chosen because of the kind of thinking the organization needs next.

Sometimes people need to see what is actually happening. Sometimes they need to challenge an assumption. Sometimes the problem itself needs to be reframed. Sometimes people need to discover connections. Sometimes they need to imagine possibilities. Sometimes they need to design the conditions under which capability can emerge. Sometimes they need to stop discussing and try something. And sometimes they need to reflect on what happened and learn from it.

Catalyst Questions™ helps you recognize what kind of thinking is needed—and choose questions that make that thinking more likely.

The Catalyst Question Path

The eight question families are not necessarily sequential. You may move among them during a single conversation.

Question Family	Core Question
SEE	What is actually happening?
CHALLENGE	What are we assuming?
REFRAME	What if we are asking the wrong question?
CONNECT	What else influences this—and what does this influence?
EXPLORE	What might be possible?
DESIGN	What would have to become true?
ACT & LEARN	What could we try, and what would we learn?
REFLECT	What did this teach us?

The Catalyst's skill is recognizing where the conversation is stuck and what kind of question might move the thinking forward.

1. SEE

When the organization needs to understand what is actually happening

Use See Questions when people are moving toward solutions before they adequately understand the situation.

Questions to consider

- What is actually happening?
- What evidence do we have?
- What are we observing rather than assuming?
- Where does this occur most often?

- Where does it not occur?
- Who experiences this differently?
- What would the people closest to the work say is happening?
- What happens immediately before this?
- What happens immediately afterward?
- What patterns do we see?
- What has changed?
- What hasn't changed?
- What are people actually doing—not what does the process say they should be doing?
- What would we see if we watched the work happen?
- What do we know? What do we merely believe?

Catalyst caution: Do not turn observation into diagnosis too quickly. Seeing is deliberately descriptive before it becomes explanatory.

2. CHALLENGE

When assumptions have become invisible

Every organization develops beliefs that eventually stop being treated as beliefs. They become "the way things are." Use Challenge Questions to make those assumptions visible.

Questions to consider

- What are we assuming?
- Which of those assumptions have we actually tested?
- What are we treating as fact that may only be convention?
- Why do we believe this?
- When was this last true?
- What has changed since we reached that conclusion?
- What would have to be true for our assumption to be wrong?
- What evidence would change our minds?
- Whose perspective would challenge this interpretation?
- Are we solving this problem this way because it is the best way—or because it is the way we know?
- What are we unwilling to question?
- What would a newcomer find strange about the way we do this?
- What are we rewarding while saying we want something different?
- What would happen if we stopped doing this altogether?

Catalyst caution: Challenge the assumption, not the person holding it. Curiosity opens thinking. Interrogation closes it.

3. REFRAME

When the organization may be solving the wrong problem

Reframing changes the question before changing the answer. Use Reframe Questions when the proposed solution has arrived suspiciously early or when repeated attempts to solve the problem have failed.

Questions to consider

- What if this is not the real problem?
- What problem are we actually trying to solve?
- How else might we describe what is happening?
- What if we started with the desired capability rather than the proposed solution?
- Are we describing a learning problem—or a performance problem?
- Are we describing a people problem—or a system problem?
- What would this look like from the employee's perspective?
- From the customer's?
- From the manager's?
- What if the behavior we dislike is actually rational given the current system?
- Instead of asking how to get people to do this, what would make them want—or find it easier—to do it?
- What if nothing new needs to be built?
- What if the capability already exists somewhere?
- If we could not use the solution currently being proposed, what would we do?
- What question would produce a completely different set of answers?

Catalyst caution: Do not reframe simply to sound clever. A useful reframe opens a more productive path to understanding or action.

4. CONNECT

When people are seeing pieces rather than a system

Use Connect Questions to reveal relationships, interdependencies, contradictions, and opportunities for orchestration.

Questions to consider

- What else influences this?
- What does this influence?
- What has to work together for this capability to emerge?
- Who else contributes to this outcome?
- What happens upstream?
- What happens downstream?
- Where are the handoffs?
- What other initiatives touch this capability?

- Which parts of the organization are solving related problems independently?
- What already exists that we have failed to connect?
- Where is one part of the organization unintentionally defeating another?
- What infrastructure supports this?
- What experiences develop it?
- What conditions encourage—or suppress—it?
- Where does knowledge need to move?
- Who possesses knowledge that someone else needs?
- What relationship, if strengthened, could improve several parts of the system at once?

Catalyst caution: Connection is not the same as complexity. The purpose is not to draw the biggest system map possible. It is to identify relationships that matter.

5. EXPLORE

When the organization needs possibilities rather than conclusions

Use Explore Questions to expand the range of possibilities before narrowing toward a solution. This is the territory Warren Berger captures particularly well with “What if?”

Questions to consider

- What might be possible?
- What if we started over?
- What if we had no legacy system to preserve?
- What if we had to accomplish this without creating a program?
- What if employees designed the answer?
- What if managers did?
- What if AI could handle part of this?
- What if AI could not be used at all?
- Where is someone already doing this unusually well?
- What could we borrow from a completely different field?
- What would the ideal experience look like?
- What would we try if failure were inexpensive?
- What would we do if we had half the resources?
- What would we do if we had twice the ambition?
- What possibility are we dismissing too quickly?
- What have we not imagined yet?

Catalyst caution: Do not evaluate while you are still trying to expand possibility. Exploration and selection require different kinds of thinking.

6. DESIGN

When possibility needs to become a Capability System

Use Design Questions to move from an attractive idea toward the Infrastructure, Experiences, and Conditions that could make it real.

Questions to consider

- What would have to become true for this capability to emerge?
- What would people need to be able to do?
- What infrastructure would make that possible?
- What experiences would develop the required capability?
- What conditions would encourage people to use it?
- What might discourage them?
- What would managers need to do differently?
- What would employees experience differently?
- What should become easier?
- What useful difficulty should remain?
- What role should AI play?
- What should AI deliberately not do?
- What feedback would people need?
- Where should reflection occur?
- How will people practice?
- How will what is learned improve the next experience?
- How could the elements reinforce one another?
- What are we designing that the organization will eventually need to sustain without us?

Catalyst caution: Do not let design collapse back into program design. The intervention is only one part of the Capability System.

7. ACT & LEARN

When further discussion is producing diminishing returns

Catalysts do not believe every uncertainty must be resolved before action. Sometimes the fastest way to learn is to try something. Use Act & Learn Questions to convert uncertainty into a purposeful experiment.

Questions to consider

- What could we try?
- What is the smallest useful experiment?
- What do we most need to learn?
- What assumption could we test?
- What would we expect to happen if our thinking is correct?

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- Where could we test this safely?
- Who should participate?
- What would success look like?
- What would failure teach us?
- What evidence should we collect?
- How quickly could we get useful feedback?
- What should we deliberately leave unresolved until we learn more?
- What would cause us to stop?
- What would cause us to expand?
- When will we examine what happened?
- What will we do with what we learn?

Catalyst caution: An experiment without a learning question is just a small implementation. Know what you are trying to learn.

8. REFLECT

When experience needs to become capability

Experience does not automatically produce learning. Use Reflect Questions to extract learning from work, conversations, experiments, successes, and failures.

Questions to consider

- What happened?
- What surprised us?
- What worked?
- What didn't?
- What did we expect that did not occur?
- What occurred that we did not expect?
- What assumption changed?
- What do we understand now that we did not understand before?
- What would we do differently?
- What should we continue?
- What should we stop?
- What remains unresolved?
- What new question has emerged?
- Who else needs to know what we learned?
- Where else might this apply?
- How should this change the next iteration?
- What might we still be missing?

Catalyst caution: Reflection is not documentation. The objective is not to record what happened. It is to change what happens next.

Choosing the Next Question

When a conversation stalls, resist the temptation to simply ask another question. First ask yourself: What does the group need to do next?

If the group needs to…	Try…
Understand reality more clearly	SEE
Surface an unexamined belief	CHALLENGE
Reconsider the problem itself	REFRAME
Recognize interdependencies	CONNECT
Generate possibilities	EXPLORE
Turn possibility into conditions for capability	DESIGN
Replace discussion with experimentation	ACT & LEARN
Extract learning from experience	REFLECT

Then choose one question. Ask it. And give people time to think.

The Question Behind the Question

Before asking a Catalyst Question, the Catalyst should ask a private question:

Why am I asking this?

Am I genuinely curious?

Am I trying to understand?

Am I trying to help the group see something?

Or am I trying to maneuver people toward the answer I already want?

A question can be an invitation, a challenge, a provocation, a diagnostic, a doorway, or a disguised argument. Catalysts can use all of these deliberately. But they should know which one they are using.

Do not disguise advocacy as inquiry.

If you have an important point to make, sometimes the most honest thing to do is make it.

From Good Questions to Catalyst Questions

A good question can produce an interesting answer. A Catalyst Question should do more.

It should help the organization become better able to think, learn, decide, and act without depending on the Catalyst.

- Does it open rather than prematurely close thinking?
- Does it expose something that matters?
- Does it invite knowledge I do not already possess?
- Does it help people connect perspectives?
- Does it move the conversation toward capability rather than merely toward an answer?
- Could the people in this conversation begin asking questions like this themselves?

The Catalyst's objective is not to become the person with all the great questions. It is to help create an organization that asks better questions without us.

A Simple Catalyst Questions Worksheet

Capability, challenge, or opportunity:

_____

_____

What appears to be happening?

_____

_____

_____

Where does the conversation seem stuck?

_____

_____

_____

What kind of thinking is needed next?

☐ SEE ☐ CHALLENGE ☐ REFRAME ☐ CONNECT

☐ EXPLORE ☐ DESIGN ☐ ACT & LEARN ☐ REFLECT

The question I might ask:

_____

_____

Why this question? What might it help people see or discover?

_____

_____

What happened when I asked it?

_____

_____

What question does the conversation need next?

_____

_____

A Final Reminder

The power of Catalyst Questions does not reside in the list. It resides in judgment.

The same question can unlock one conversation and derail another.

Sometimes the Catalyst should ask. Sometimes listen. Sometimes challenge. Sometimes provide expertise. Sometimes allow silence.

And sometimes say: "I think I know something that may help. Would it be useful if I shared it?"

The Catalyst's craft is not asking questions instead of giving answers. It is knowing what kind of contribution will help the organization become more capable next.

CATALYST QUESTIONS™ COMPLETED EXAMPLE

Illustrative Scenario: Uneven AI Adoption

The Situation

A company has invested substantially in enterprise AI tools and introductory training. Six months later, adoption is uneven. Senior leaders believe employees need more AI training and are considering a mandatory second wave.

Catalyst stance: The existing frame may be right. The purpose of the questions is not to prove it wrong, but to determine whether it adequately explains what is happening.

1. SEE

Thinking needed: Understand reality more clearly

Questions selected

• What is actually happening?

• Where is AI use high, where is it low, and where is it absent?

• What are people actually doing—not what do we assume they are doing?

• What would employees closest to the work say is getting in the way?

What happened: Usage data and interviews show three distinct patterns. Some teams use AI frequently. Some employees completed the training and can demonstrate the tools but rarely use them in their actual work. A third group has limited access to approved tools or is uncertain which uses are permitted.

What the Catalyst learned / what changed: Low adoption is not one condition. More training might help some employees, but it cannot explain all three patterns.

2. CHALLENGE

Thinking needed: Surface an unexamined belief

Questions selected

• What are we assuming when we say low use means people need more training?

• What evidence would tell us that lack of skill is actually the primary barrier?

• Are employees being rewarded—or unintentionally discouraged—for using AI?

What happened: Leaders recognize that they have been using adoption data as a proxy for capability. Managers vary widely in whether they encourage AI use. Some employees fear that using AI on visible work will be judged as taking shortcuts.

What the Catalyst learned / what changed: The conversation shifts from "Why aren't people using what we taught them?" to "What different forces are shaping use?"

3. REFRAME

Thinking needed: Reconsider the problem itself

Questions selected

- What if this is not primarily a training problem?
- What if employees who know how to use AI are making a rational choice not to use it?
- What would make AI use easier, safer, and more valuable in the flow of real work?

What happened: The group reframes the challenge as: "How do we create the capability and conditions for appropriate AI use in the work where it adds value?"

What the Catalyst learned / what changed: The original frame is not discarded. Skill remains one possible cause. But it is no longer assumed to be the whole problem.

4. CONNECT

Thinking needed: Recognize interdependencies

Questions selected

- What else influences AI use?
- What infrastructure, experiences, and conditions support—or suppress—it?
- Who else contributes to this outcome?
- Where is one part of the organization unintentionally defeating another?

What happened: The group maps several connected factors: tool access, workflow fit, data-security rules, manager expectations, confidence, examples of approved use, time pressure, and the availability of help at the moment of need.

What the Catalyst learned / what changed: The group can now see AI adoption as a Capability System rather than a training event.

5. EXPLORE

Thinking needed: Generate possibilities

Questions selected

- What might be possible if we designed around real workflows rather than another general course?
- Where is someone already doing this unusually well?
- What if managers and employees jointly identified high-value AI use cases?

What happened: Several possibilities emerge: workflow-specific use cases, manager discussion guides, peer demonstrations, office hours, clearer guardrails, AI coaching, and small team experiments.

What the Catalyst learned / what changed: The group has enough possibilities. Continuing to brainstorm would now add less value than testing the strongest ideas.

6. DESIGN

Thinking needed: Turn possibility into conditions for capability

Questions selected

- What would have to become true for appropriate AI use to become normal in selected workflows?
- What should become easier?
- What feedback and support would people need?

• What role should managers play?

What happened: The group chooses two workflows with clear business value. It designs approved examples, manager prompts, in-work guidance, peer support, rapid feedback, and explicit permission to experiment within defined guardrails.

What the Catalyst learned / what changed: The design combines Infrastructure, Experiences, and Conditions rather than defaulting to another course.

7. ACT & LEARN

Thinking needed: Replace discussion with experimentation

Questions selected

• What is the smallest useful experiment?

• What do we most need to learn?

• What would we expect to happen if our thinking is correct?

• What evidence should we collect?

What happened: Two teams will test the redesigned approach for six weeks. The learning question is: "When employees have a valuable workflow use case, clear permission, manager encouragement, and just-in-time support, does appropriate AI use increase—and does it improve the work?"

What the Catalyst learned / what changed: Measures include actual use, employee confidence, time saved or quality improved where measurable, manager observations, and examples of where the approach fails.

8. REFLECT

Thinking needed: Extract learning from experience

Questions selected

• What happened?

• What surprised us?

• Which assumptions changed?

• What should change in the next iteration?

• Who else needs to know what we learned?

What happened: After six weeks, AI use rises substantially in one workflow and modestly in the other. Employees report that manager encouragement and concrete examples mattered more than additional generic instruction. One workflow proves poorly suited to the available AI tool.

What the Catalyst learned / what changed: The company decides not to launch a mandatory second wave of general training. It expands the workflow-based approach selectively, improves manager guidance, and retains targeted skill-building where evidence shows a genuine skill gap.

Completed Worksheet Snapshot

Capability, challenge, or opportunity: Uneven adoption of enterprise AI tools six months after launch.

What appears to be happening?: AI adoption is below leadership expectations, but use varies significantly by team and workflow.

Where does the conversation seem stuck?: Senior leaders have moved quickly from low adoption to the conclusion that employees need more training.

What kind of thinking is needed next?: SEE first; then CHALLENGE and REFRAME if the evidence warrants it.

The question I might ask: What are we assuming when we say low use means people need more training?

Why this question?: It tests the causal assumption behind the proposed solution without presuming that the assumption is wrong.

What happened when I asked it?: The group recognized that adoption data did not distinguish among skill, access, workflow fit, manager support, risk concerns, or perceived value.

What question does the conversation need next?: What else influences AI use—and where might the current system be making non-use rational?

What This Example Demonstrates

• The Catalyst did not begin by opposing the proposed training solution.

• The questions were selected according to the kind of thinking needed next.

• Reframing occurred only after observation and evidence suggested that the original frame was incomplete.

• All eight families happened to become useful in this example, but an actual Catalyst Conversation would not need to use all eight.

• Act & Learn remained one family: the action was deliberately designed to generate learning.

• The result was not a final answer. It was a better understanding, a purposeful experiment, and a stronger next iteration.

Catalyst reminder: The objective is not to demonstrate skill at asking questions. It is to help the organization become better able to think, learn, decide, and act.

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