Catalyst Questions™ Card Set

Companion to Becoming a Catalyst | *John Coné*

Questions That Help Better Thinking Happen

Purpose

A Catalyst does not ask questions simply to stimulate discussion.

Catalyst Questions are intended to change what becomes possible in the thinking.

They can help people notice something they have overlooked, examine an assumption, look beneath an obvious explanation, encounter a different perspective, imagine another possibility, or turn new understanding into action.

This Card Set is a companion to the Catalyst Questions™ instrument and the Conversation Design Canvas™.

The Conversation Design Canvas helps you determine what kind of thinking a conversation needs.

The Catalyst Questions Card Set helps you find a question that might produce it.

The cards are not scripts.

They are prompts. Sometimes you will want to use the shared language of your organization, asking the question in a way that will be more readily understood.

And sometimes the best question will not be on a card at all.

Choose the Thinking You Need

Before choosing a question, ask: What does the thinking need now?

If people need to…	Try…
Separate what they see from what they think it means	OBSERVE
Look beneath the apparent problem	UNDERSTAND
Examine assumptions or reconsider the frame	CHALLENGE
Bring different knowledge and perspectives together	CONNECT
Open possibilities	IMAGINE
Turn new thinking into movement	ACTIVATE

You do not need to move through the categories in order. You may use only one card in an entire conversation. The purpose is not to ask more questions. It is to ask the question the thinking needs now.

Four Ways to Use the Cards

1. Choose Before the Conversation

As you design a conversation, identify the kind of thinking required and select one or two questions that might help produce it. Do not prepare so many questions that you become committed to asking them.

2. Use Them When the Conversation Needs Help

Keep the cards available during the conversation. When thinking becomes stuck, superficial, overly certain, or prematurely action-oriented, consider whether one of the cards might help. But follow the thinking, not the deck.

3. Put the Cards in the Group's Hands

The Catalyst does not have to ask all the Catalyst Questions. In the right conversation, give participants selected cards and invite them to introduce a question when they believe it would help the group's thinking. You might distribute an entire category, place several relevant cards on the table, or give each participant one card and say: “Don't feel obligated to use this. But if there comes a point when you think this question would help our thinking, ask it.” The objective is not to turn the conversation into a card game. It is to give other people permission to catalyze the conversation themselves.

4. Give Them Away

Invite someone to take a card into another conversation. Give a team a question to experiment with for a month. Encourage people to create questions of their own. Over time, you may hear someone ask a Catalyst Question without reaching for a card. At that point, the card has done its job.

From Asking Catalyst Questions to Building More Catalysts

Catalyst Questions may be one of the easiest entry points into Catalyst practice.

Someone does not need to lead a Talent function, design a Capability System, or facilitate an executive meeting to ask a question that helps a group think differently.

One question can be a small developmental experiment.

The cards therefore do not have to remain in the Catalyst's hands. Use them to help other people develop the instinct to recognize when a conversation needs a different question—and the confidence to ask it.

The cards are scaffolding. The capability is knowing when a different question could change the thinking.

Eventually, you hope people stop needing the cards.

CATALYST QUESTIONS™ — REPRODUCIBLE CARDS 1–6

OBSERVE **WHAT ARE WE ACTUALLY SEEING?** **What are we actually seeing—not what do we think it means?** **USE WHEN Interpretation and observation have become mixed together.** **WATCH FOR Don't prohibit interpretation. Separate it from observation long enough to see more clearly.**	**OBSERVE** **WHAT DOESN'T FIT?** **What are we seeing that doesn't fit our current explanation?** **USE WHEN The group has settled quickly around a plausible explanation.** **WATCH FOR The exception may be noise. Don't assume every anomaly is meaningful.**
OBSERVE WHERE IS IT ALREADY HAPPENING? Where is the capability or behavior we want already happening? USE WHEN The conversation is focused primarily on deficiencies. WATCH FOR Don't assume the successful example can simply be copied. Find out what makes it possible.	OBSERVE WHAT IS CHANGING? What are we seeing now that we weren't seeing six months ago? USE WHEN The group needs to notice movement rather than take a snapshot of current conditions. WATCH FOR Change does not automatically mean trend.
UNDERSTAND WHAT ELSE COULD EXPLAIN THIS? If our current explanation is wrong—or incomplete—what else might explain what we're seeing? USE WHEN One diagnosis has become dominant too early. WATCH FOR The purpose is not to manufacture alternatives. Generate only explanations that are reasonably plausible.	UNDERSTAND WHAT IS THE SYSTEM PRODUCING? If people are behaving rationally within the system we've created, what is the system encouraging them to do? USE WHEN People are being blamed for behavior that may be shaped by conditions around them. WATCH FOR Systems influence behavior. They don't eliminate individual responsibility.

CATALYST QUESTIONS™ — REPRODUCIBLE CARDS 7–12

UNDERSTAND **WHERE IS THE FRICTION?** **What makes the desired behavior harder than it needs to be?** **USE WHEN The group knows what to do but aren't consistently doing it.** **WATCH FOR Don't assume friction is the only explanation. Knowledge, motivation, consequences, and capability may still matter.**	**UNDERSTAND** **WHAT ARE WE REALLY TRYING TO BUILD?** **What capability are we actually trying to create?** **USE WHEN The conversation has become dominated by programs, activities, platforms, or deliverables.** **WATCH FOR Avoid replacing one vague word with another. Describe what people or the organization should actually become capable of doing.**
CHALLENGE WHAT ARE WE ASSUMING? What are we treating as true without having examined it? USE WHEN The group's reasoning appears to rest on assumptions nobody has made explicit. WATCH FOR Every decision contains assumptions. The objective is not to eliminate them but to make important ones visible.	CHALLENGE WHAT IF THE OPPOSITE WERE TRUE? What might we see differently if we temporarily assumed the opposite? USE WHEN The group is deeply anchored in one way of seeing the issue. WATCH FOR This is a thinking device, not an argument that the opposite actually is true.
CHALLENGE ARE WE SOLVING THE RIGHT PROBLEM? If we solved this problem exactly as we've defined it, would we get the result we actually want? USE WHEN People are moving efficiently toward a solution but the original frame deserves examination. WATCH FOR Do not reframe simply to sound clever. Sometimes the frame you already have is the best one.	CHALLENGE WHAT WOULD WE DO IF WE HADN'T INHERITED THIS? If this didn't already exist, would we create it this way today? USE WHEN History and existing practice may be constraining the range of possibilities. WATCH FOR There may be good reasons the current practice evolved. Understand them before discarding it.

CATALYST QUESTIONS™ — REPRODUCIBLE CARDS 13–18

CONNECT **WHO SEES THIS DIFFERENTLY?** **Who would look at this situation and see something completely different?** **USE WHEN The people involved share similar experience, expertise, or assumptions.** **WATCH FOR Seek useful difference, not disagreement for its own sake.**	**CONNECT** **WHO ALREADY KNOWS SOMETHING WE NEED?** **Where in the organization might someone already know something that could help us?** **USE WHEN The group is preparing to create knowledge or solutions from scratch.** **WATCH FOR Knowledge developed elsewhere may need translation rather than simple transfer.**
CONNECT WHAT ELSE DOES THIS CONNECT TO? Where else in the organization might this same pattern be showing up? USE WHEN A problem is being treated as isolated. WATCH FOR Similarity does not prove common cause.	CONNECT WHO IS MISSING? Whose experience or perspective do we need but don't have? USE WHEN The conversation feels complete suspiciously early—or important perspectives on the work are absent. WATCH FOR Don't turn every conversation into a representative committee. Add perspective when it can improve the thinking.
IMAGINE WHAT BECOMES POSSIBLE NOW? What is possible now that wasn't possible before? USE WHEN Technology, knowledge, circumstances, or constraints have changed but thinking remains anchored in the old environment. WATCH FOR Possible does not mean desirable.	IMAGINE WHAT WOULD WE DESIGN TODAY? If we were starting with the capability we need rather than the solution we already have, what might we design? USE WHEN People are improving an existing solution rather than reconsidering what is needed. WATCH FOR Don't discard useful existing infrastructure merely because something new sounds more interesting.

CATALYST QUESTIONS™ — REPRODUCIBLE CARDS 19–24

IMAGINE **WHAT IS THE SMALLEST USEFUL EXPERIMENT?** **What is the smallest thing we could try that would teach us something important?** **USE WHEN Uncertainty is preventing action or the group is attempting to design a complete solution before learning from use.** **WATCH FOR Small experiments should produce useful learning, not merely small activity.**	**IMAGINE** **WHAT WOULD HAVE TO BE TRUE?** **What would have to be true for this possibility to work?** **USE WHEN An idea is intriguing but the group is either accepting or rejecting it too quickly.** **WATCH FOR Use the question to expose conditions and assumptions, not to build an artificial case for a favored idea.**
ACTIVATE WHAT SHOULD WE TRY? Given what we know—and what we still don't know—what is worth trying next? USE WHEN The group has enough understanding to move but not enough certainty to justify a finished solution. WATCH FOR An experiment is not an excuse for careless action. Match the size of the experiment to the consequences of being wrong.	ACTIVATE WHAT LEARNING CAN WE RELEASE? What have we learned that someone else could use right now? USE WHEN Useful knowledge or insight has emerged but is likely to remain with the people who discovered it. WATCH FOR Don't wait to package everything perfectly before allowing useful learning to travel. But make sure what you share is ready enough to be useful rather than misleading.
ACTIVATE WHAT DO WE STILL NEED TO ANSWER? What question do we still need to answer before we can move? USE WHEN The conversation has generated considerable thinking but the group remains uncertain about what to do next. WATCH FOR Don't allow the search for one more answer to become an excuse for avoiding action. Ask whether the unanswered question would actually change what you do.	ACTIVATE WHAT CHANGES BECAUSE OF THIS? What should we do differently because of what we now know? USE WHEN The group has reached an insight or conclusion but has not translated it into changed behavior, practice, or decision. WATCH FOR Not every insight requires immediate action. Sometimes the appropriate action is to keep watching, gather more evidence, or deliberately do nothing yet.

CATALYST QUESTIONS™ — CREATE YOUR OWN

CREATE YOUR OWN **THE THINKING I WANT TO HELP PRODUCE** _____ **MY QUESTION** _____ _____ _____ **USE WHEN** _____ **WATCH FOR** _____ **A useful Catalyst Question opens a more productive path to understanding or action. It does not need to sound clever.**	**CREATE YOUR OWN** **THE THINKING I WANT TO HELP PRODUCE** _____ **MY QUESTION** _____ _____ _____ **USE WHEN** _____ **WATCH FOR** _____ **A useful Catalyst Question opens a more productive path to understanding or action. It does not need to sound clever.**
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THE CARDS ARE PROMPTS Use the shared language of your organization. Ask the question in a way that will be readily understood.	THE DECK IS NOT THE CAPABILITY The goal is to notice when different thinking is needed—and know how to help make it happen.

A Few Cautions About Using the Deck

• **Don't ask a question merely because you have a card for it.** The conversation determines the question, not the deck.

• **Don't play "stump the group."** Catalyst Questions are not riddles and should not demonstrate how insightful the questioner is.

• **Don't make every conversation an inquiry.** Sometimes people need information, expertise, direction, or a decision.

• **Don't keep questioning after the group is ready to act.** Inquiry can become avoidance.

• **Don't distribute the cards if doing so will make the conversation artificial.** Sometimes the Catalyst should simply ask the question naturally.

• **Don't require participants to use the card they receive.** Permission is catalytic. Obligation is an exercise.

• **Don't assume the printed question is the best question.** Adapt it. Simplify it. Use the shared language of your organization. Create a better one.

• **Don't mistake the deck for the capability.** The objective is to create more people who notice when different thinking is needed—and know how to help make it happen.

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