Catalyst Development Guide™

Companion to Becoming a Catalyst | *John Coné*

Becoming the Catalyst Through Practice

Purpose

The Catalyst Development Guide is designed to help Talent professionals gradually develop a Catalyst way of working.

It is not a competency assessment. It does not ask you to rate yourself. It does not identify your deficiencies. It does not assume that every Catalyst should become equally accomplished at every Catalyst practice.

Instead, it begins with a different premise:

The identity follows the practice.

You become more Catalyst-like by trying different ways of working in real situations, noticing what happens, reflecting on what you learn, and deciding what to try next.

The objective is not to prove that you are a Catalyst. The objective is to experiment with becoming one.

PART ONE — The Eight Catalyst Practices

1. SEE

Catalysts observe before they diagnose. They notice patterns, contradictions, workarounds, emerging practices, unusual successes, weak signals, and things that do not quite fit.

Instead of immediately asking: What should we do?

They may first ask: What are we actually seeing?

2. CONVENE

Catalysts bring together people whose perspectives, knowledge, or experience need to encounter one another. They do not convene merely to communicate. They convene to enable people to think together.

Instead of asking: Who needs to attend?

They may ask: Whose perspective needs to encounter whose?

3. ORCHESTRATE

Catalysts recognize that capability rarely comes from a single intervention. They work across people, systems, experiences, leaders, technology, communities, and organizational conditions. They do not need to own all those elements. They help them work together.

Instead of asking: What should Talent build?

They may ask: What needs to come together?

4. SHAPE CONVERSATIONS

Catalysts use questions and conversation deliberately. They help people surface assumptions, examine evidence, reframe problems, make meaning, and discover possibilities.

Instead of asking: What should I tell them?

They may ask: What conversation would help them think differently?

5. MOVE KNOWLEDGE

Catalysts notice where useful knowledge is trapped and help it travel. They connect expertise with need, experience with opportunity, and people who know with people who need to know.

Instead of asking: How should we communicate this?

They may ask: Who could do something differently if they knew this?

6. DESIGN CAPABILITY SYSTEMS

Catalysts look beyond individual programs or interventions. They examine the Infrastructure, Experiences, and Conditions through which capability develops and is sustained.

Instead of asking: What learning solution should we design?

They may ask: What system would make this capability more likely to emerge?

7. ACCELERATE LEARNING

Catalysts shorten unnecessary delays between experience and reflection, knowledge movement, experimentation, adoption, and continuous refinement. They ask: Where is learning waiting? They remove unnecessary friction without removing the reflection, judgment, governance, or deliberation that good learning requires.

8. CULTIVATE ORGANIZATIONAL AWARENESS

Catalysts help organizations notice what is changing while it is still emerging. They connect observations, surface patterns, challenge assumptions, and help people determine what deserves continued attention.

Instead of asking: What will happen next?

They may ask: What are we seeing now that might matter later?

PART TWO — Choose Your Edge

Do not assess yourself against all eight practices. Do not rank them. Do not identify your weakest practice.

Instead, look at the work in front of you and ask:

Where might working differently teach me something useful about becoming a Catalyst?

Choose one practice. Possibly two, if they naturally belong together.

My Development Edge

The Catalyst practice I want to experiment with is:

_____

_____

Why this one?

What about my current work makes this practice worth exploring?

_____

_____

My Current Instinct

When faced with situations like this, what do I normally do?

_____

A Different Possibility

What might I do differently if I approached the situation as a Catalyst?

Catalyst Caution

Do not choose a practice simply because you think you are bad at it. And do not choose one because you think a Catalyst is supposed to be good at it. Choose a practice because trying it in your current work could teach you something useful.

Development begins with a useful experiment, not a deficiency.

PART THREE — Design a Development Experiment

Choose a real situation. Not a simulation. Not an exercise you hope to try someday. Something in your actual work where you have an opportunity to behave differently.

The Situation

What is happening?

What I Would Normally Do

If I operated from my usual habits, what would I probably do?

What I Will Try Instead

What different Catalyst practice will I experiment with?

The Smallest Useful Change

Do not redesign your entire role. What is the smallest meaningful change in your behavior that would allow you to experiment?

What I Will Watch For

What might tell me that this different approach is useful?

Who Else Might Benefit?

If the experiment works, what might someone else be able to do differently?

_____

_____

That last question matters. Much Catalyst work is invisible. Success may not look like: I produced something important. It may look like: Someone else became more capable.

PART FOUR — Reflect

After the experiment, return to these questions.

What Happened?

_____

_____

What Surprised Me?

_____

_____

What Did the Different Practice Make Possible?

_____

_____

What Did It Make More Difficult?

_____

_____

What Did I Learn About the Situation?

_____

_____

What Did I Learn About Myself?

_____

_____

What Would I Do Differently Next Time?

_____

_____

What Will I Try Next?

_____

_____

Do not ask: Did I successfully behave like a Catalyst?

What did I learn about when and how this way of working helps?

Then experiment again.

CATALYST DEVELOPMENT EXPERIMENT™

A Repeat-Use Working Instrument

SITUATION

What is happening?

_____

_____

MY INSTINCT

What would I normally do?

_____

_____

MY EDGE

Which Catalyst practice will I try?

- ☐ See
- ☐ Convene
- ☐ Orchestrate
- ☐ Shape Conversations
- ☐ Move Knowledge
- ☐ Design Capability Systems
- ☐ Accelerate Learning
- ☐ Cultivate Organizational Awareness

MY EXPERIMENT

What will I do differently?

_____

_____

MY WATCH FOR

What will I pay particular attention to?

_____

_____

OTHERS

If this works, what might someone else be able to do differently?

_____

_____

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AFTERWARD

What happened?

_____

_____

What surprised me?

_____

_____

What did I learn?

_____

_____

What will I try next?

_____

_____

Catalyst caution: The objective is not to demonstrate Catalyst behavior. The objective is to learn from practicing it.

COMPLETED CATALYST DEVELOPMENT EXPERIMENT™

Example

Situation

A business leader has asked me to create a manager training program.

Employee survey results show that employees want more frequent and useful feedback from managers. The leader believes managers need feedback skills training and wants Talent to develop a program quickly.

My Instinct

My normal response would be to clarify the target population, identify the desired feedback behaviors, determine what managers already know, and begin designing the learning solution.

That would be a responsible response.

But I would already have accepted the frame:

Managers aren't providing useful feedback because they don't know how.

My Edge

SEE — with some ORCHESTRATE

My Experiment

Before accepting the training request, I will spend one week looking more closely at the conditions surrounding feedback.

I will talk with several managers and employees. I will look at when feedback currently happens; what managers believe they are expected to do; what employees actually experience; what systems or processes encourage or discourage frequent feedback; whether some managers are already doing this particularly well; and what makes their situation different.

I will not promise a different solution. I will simply remain curious about the problem a little longer.

My Watch For

I will pay particular attention to contradictions.

Do managers say feedback matters but experience signals that something else matters more? Do employees and managers describe the problem differently? Are there managers who already produce the desired behavior without additional training? If so, what is different around them?

Others

If the experiment works, the business leader and managers may develop a more useful understanding of the problem before we invest in a solution.

Talent may also avoid building training for a problem that training alone cannot solve.

Afterward: What Happened?

Managers generally knew how to give feedback.

The bigger problem was that the organization had unintentionally defined feedback as an event associated with formal performance conversations.

Managers described themselves as too busy to add more feedback meetings. But several highly regarded managers were giving feedback frequently without scheduling additional meetings. They incorporated it into project reviews, customer discussions, one-on-ones, and everyday work.

The issue was not primarily lack of feedback skill. It was the way feedback had been framed and embedded in work.

What Surprised Me?

I expected to discover a combination of skill and time constraints.

Instead, I discovered that some managers had effectively redefined what "giving feedback" meant.

They were not finding more time for feedback. They were using differently the time they already had.

What Did the Different Practice Make Possible?

By observing before diagnosing, I avoided prematurely turning an organizational practice problem into a training problem.

It also gave us examples of managers already producing the desired capability.

Instead of beginning by designing a program, we began by bringing those managers together with several peers to understand what they were doing differently.

What Did It Make More Difficult?

The business leader initially wanted a quick answer.

Remaining curious created some discomfort because it looked as though Talent was delaying action.

I had to explain that we were not refusing the request. We were spending a short amount of time making sure we were solving the right problem.

What Did I Learn About the Situation?

The organization did not necessarily need managers to know more about feedback.

It needed feedback to become more naturally embedded in everyday work.

What Did I Learn About Myself?

I discovered how quickly I still move from a reasonable diagnosis to solution design.

I was not jumping to a foolish conclusion.

I was jumping to a plausible conclusion.

That may be the more dangerous habit.

What Would I Do Differently Next Time?

I would involve the business leader earlier in the observation process rather than returning later with what I had discovered.

That would make the inquiry something we were doing together rather than something Talent was doing on the leader's behalf.

What Will I Try Next?

CONVENE.

Rather than turning the successful managers' practices into content and teaching them to everyone else, I want to experiment with bringing managers together to examine how feedback can become part of ordinary work.

My next development experiment grows naturally from this one.

The identity follows the practice.

CATALYST COMMENTARY

The completed example looks deceptively simple.

Someone received a training request, investigated the situation, discovered that the initial diagnosis was incomplete, and chose a different response.

Talent professionals have done that for decades.

So what makes this a Catalyst development experiment?

The answer is not the technique. It is what the person is practicing becoming.

Development Is the Subject

The business problem matters. But the instrument is not primarily designed to solve the feedback problem. It is designed to help the Talent professional deliberately experiment with a different way of working.

Notice the sequence:

Current instinct: Accept a reasonable diagnosis and begin responsible solution design.

Development edge: See before diagnosing.

Experiment: Remain curious for one additional week.

Observation: Managers largely possess the skill.

Discovery: The organizational context has framed feedback as an additional event rather than part of everyday work.

Next experiment: Convene rather than convert the discovery immediately into training content.

The development occurs through the sequence.

The Current Instinct Is Not Wrong

The example does not portray traditional Talent practice as incompetent. The person's initial instinct was perfectly reasonable. Clarify the population. Define the behavior. Assess current knowledge. Design the learning. That might even have produced a good program.

Catalyst development often begins not by replacing a bad practice with a good one, but by asking:

What might become possible if I don't automatically do what I already know how to do well?

Choose an Edge, Not a Gap

Traditional development frequently begins with gaps. What am I not good at? What competency should I improve? What does my assessment say?

The Catalyst Development Guide deliberately avoids that logic. There are no ratings. No proficiency levels. No target scores. No expectation that every Catalyst will become equally skilled in every practice.

Instead: Choose the edge of your current way of working and experiment beyond it.

For one person, that edge may be seeing. For another, convening. For another, relinquishing ownership. For another, providing an answer more readily when years of coaching have made questioning their default. The edge is contextual.

Keep the Experiment Small

The person in the example does not announce a new philosophy of Talent. They do not redesign the manager-development strategy. They do not tell the business leader that training is obsolete. They spend one week looking more carefully.

That is enough.

Identity experiments work best when they are real but recoverable. Try something. See what happens. Learn. Try again.

The objective is not to prove the Catalyst model. It is to expand your repertoire.

Pay Attention to the Discomfort

One of the most useful observations in the example may be: Remaining curious created some discomfort because it looked as though Talent was delaying action.

That is development. New professional identities often create tension with old expectations. The business may expect an answer. Your colleagues may expect a deliverable. You may expect yourself to demonstrate expertise.

Catalyst practice sometimes asks you to behave differently. The discomfort is worth noticing.

But do not romanticize it. Sometimes the business leader really does need the answer now. Give it.

Catalyst practice is not automatically superior to direct assistance. The developmental objective is to gain greater choice about which response the situation requires.

Look for What Others Can Do

The question "If this works, what might someone else be able to do differently?" is intentionally part of the instrument.

Much Catalyst work is invisible. The person in the example may never receive credit for discovering a better approach to feedback. Managers may simply begin giving better feedback during everyday work.

That is fine.

Catalyst contribution is often visible through increased capability elsewhere.

Let One Experiment Create the Next

The example ends with CONVENE. That is intentional.

Catalyst development should not become: SEE this quarter. CONVENE next quarter. ORCHESTRATE in Q3.

The practices are not a curriculum. The work determines what comes next.

Seeing something may create a need to convene. Convening may reveal a system problem. Mapping the system may expose trapped knowledge. Moving knowledge may suggest an experiment. Adoption may reveal a need for continuous refinement.

Development follows the work.

Use the Other Catalyst Instruments

The Development Guide should not duplicate the other instruments.

Catalyst Field Notes™ can help capture what you observe while trying a new practice.

Catalyst Reflection Journal™ can help you examine what the experience means for the way you think about your role.

Catalyst Questions™ can help when your experiment involves shaping a conversation.

Capability Design Canvas™, Learning Velocity Map™, Organizational Awareness Scan™, and the other instruments can become resources when the developmental experiment leads you into those forms of work.

The Development Guide has a different purpose.

What am I practicing becoming?

Catalyst Cautions

• Do not turn the eight practices into an assessment. The moment we score them, people will naturally start trying to close their lowest gaps.

• Do not create a Catalyst certification in your head. There is no point at which all eight boxes become checked and you are now officially a Catalyst.

• Do not perform Catalyst behavior. Asking questions when you already know someone needs an answer is not sophisticated. It is irritating.

• Do not confuse discomfort with progress. Sometimes an experiment feels uncomfortable because it is new. Sometimes it feels uncomfortable because it is wrong for the situation. Learn the difference.

• Do not make every situation a development opportunity. Sometimes the work simply needs to get done.

• Do not seek invisibility. Invisible contribution is sometimes a consequence of Catalyst work, not an objective.

• Do not abandon your expertise. The Catalyst adds ways of contributing. The role does not require forgetting everything you already know.

• Do not rush the identity. You may practice Catalyst behaviors long before you are comfortable describing yourself as one.

Do not ask whether you are becoming a Catalyst fast enough. Ask whether your experiments are helping you become more useful to the organization.

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SECTION VII

MAKE CATALYST WORK PART OF YOUR WORK

Translating the idea into everyday practice

Catalyst Portfolio™

Catalyst Field Guide™

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