Catalyst Field Guide™

Companion to Becoming a Catalyst | John Coné

THE CATALYST WAY OF WORKING

A Field Guide for Putting the Ideas Into Practice

"Every profession develops its own way of seeing the world. Over time, it also develops its own way of working."

Throughout this book, I have resisted presenting the Catalyst as a methodology.

That was intentional.

I wanted to begin with a different way of seeing before describing a different way of working. After all, if our assumptions remain unchanged, even the best methods simply help us do yesterday's work more efficiently.

Yet, looking back across the preceding chapters, I realize that a recognizable pattern has quietly emerged.

Catalysts do not approach organizational challenges randomly. Nor do they rely on a fixed sequence of interventions.

They tend to move among a recurring set of activities:

Observe. Understand. Convene. Design. Accelerate. Reflect.

Sometimes they move through them roughly in that order.

Often they don't.

A conversation may cause them to observe something they hadn't noticed.

An experiment may reveal that they never understood the problem.

Reflection may lead directly to redesign.

An unexpected observation may require convening people before anyone understands what it means.

That is why I hesitate to call this a methodology.

It is less a process than a discipline.

Less a checklist than a habit.

Less a methodology than a way of practicing the profession.

The instruments introduced throughout this book support that discipline.

Together, they form what I think of as:

THE CATALYST WAY OF WORKING

OBSERVE → UNDERSTAND → CONVENE → DESIGN → ACCELERATE → REFLECT

↖——————————— CONTINUE ———————————↙

There is no true beginning.

There is no true end.

And there is certainly no requirement to proceed from left to right.

The organization tells you where to begin.

OBSERVE

What is happening?

Most organizational change efforts begin with action.

Catalysts often begin with observation.

They notice.

They become curious.

They resist the temptation to immediately solve the problem presented to them.

Observation is not passive. It is a disciplined attempt to see the organization before deciding what it means.

Catalysts notice:

Catalyst Questions

What am I seeing?

What surprises me?

What doesn't fit my current explanation?

Where are people behaving differently than expected?

What seems to be emerging?

What am I not seeing because I already think I know what is happening?

Useful Catalyst Instruments

Catalyst Field Notes™
Capture observations before turning them into conclusions.

Organizational Awareness Scan™
Look across the organization for patterns, emerging signals, contradictions, and developments that may deserve attention.

Capability Outlook™
Look ahead at the capabilities the organization may increasingly need.

Catalyst Caution

Observation is not an alternative to action when action is clearly needed. Sometimes people need help. Help them. The discipline is not about delaying action. It is about avoiding unnecessary certainty.

UNDERSTAND

What is producing what we see?

Observation creates clues.

Understanding connects them.

As patterns begin to emerge, Catalysts seek to understand how capability is actually developing—or being constrained.

They look beyond the individual event.

Beyond the requested solution.

Beyond the most obvious explanation.

The question changes from: What should we do about this? to: What is producing what we see?

This is the move from event to pattern, from symptom to system.

It is also where Catalysts resist one of the easiest traps in Talent work: converting every organizational problem into a people problem and every people problem into a development need.

Sometimes people do need knowledge or skill.

Sometimes the environment is making good performance difficult.

Sometimes requirements are unclear.

Sometimes consequences reward precisely the wrong behavior.

Sometimes people cannot tell how they are doing.

Sometimes knowledge exists but is trapped somewhere else.

And sometimes several of those things are true at once.

Catalyst Questions

What system surrounds this performance?

What capability is actually required?

What is helping that capability emerge?

What is constraining it?

Where is knowledge located?

Where is learning waiting?

What assumptions are we making about the cause?

Useful Catalyst Instruments

Capability Map™
Make the capability visible before deciding how to build it.

Capability System tools
Examine the Infrastructure, Experiences, and Conditions surrounding capability.

Knowledge Movement Map™
See where useful knowledge exists, where it needs to go, and what prevents it from moving.

Learning Velocity Map™
Identify delays between experience, learning, sharing, adoption, and refinement.

Catalyst Caution

Do not use analysis to prove the diagnosis you began with. A useful map should sometimes change your mind.

CONVENE

Who needs to think together?

Understanding does not automatically produce an answer.

And the Catalyst's next instinct is not always to prescribe one.

Often, it is to convene.

Capability rarely develops because one person discovers the answer.

It grows when the right knowledge, perspectives, experiences, questions, and people encounter one another.

This is why convening occupies such an important place in Catalyst work.

The Catalyst asks not simply: Who should attend? but: Whose perspective needs to encounter whose?

A good convening is not merely a meeting.

It is an intentionally designed environment in which something becomes possible that was unlikely to happen otherwise.

Catalyst Questions

Who sees this differently?

Who has knowledge others need?

Who is affected but absent?

Who has solved some version of this problem?

Which boundaries need to be crossed?

What question should these people explore together?

Who should not be in the room?

Useful Catalyst Instruments

Catalyst Questions™
Determine what kind of thinking is needed and identify questions that can help produce it.

Catalyst Conversations™
Design purposeful sequences of group thinking around recurring Catalyst challenges.

Knowledge Movement tools
Connect people who know with people who need to know.

Catalyst Caution

Convening is not automatically better than deciding. Sometimes people need a conversation. Sometimes they need an answer. Sometimes they need someone with the authority or expertise to make a decision. Use convening when thinking together creates value.

DESIGN

What would make capability more likely to emerge?

Catalysts design.

They simply design something larger than programs.

They ask how Infrastructure, Experiences, and Conditions can work together to make a desired capability more likely to emerge and sustain itself.

A course may be part of that system.

So may coaching. Technology. Manager behavior. Work assignments. Practice. Feedback. Communities. Access to expertise. Job design. Rules. Rewards. Reflection. Knowledge movement.

The departure from traditional design is not that Catalysts reject interventions.

It is that they design the system surrounding the intervention.

And they recognize that the initial design is provisional.

The people using the system will inevitably learn things the designers could not know.

Continuous refinement is therefore not maintenance after design. It is part of the design.

Catalyst Questions

What capability are we trying to create?

What Infrastructure supports it?

What Experiences develop it?

What Conditions encourage or constrain it?

How do those elements reinforce one another?

What is the smallest useful thing we could try?

How will the system learn from its own use?

Useful Catalyst Instruments

Capability Design Canvas™
Design the Infrastructure, Experiences, and Conditions that together support capability.

Experience Design Canvas™
Design experiences in which work and learning reinforce one another.

Catalyst Development Guide™
When the capability being developed is the Catalyst's own way of working, use real-work experiments rather than a conventional development plan.

Catalyst Caution

Do not simply relabel existing programs Capability Systems. The distinction is not vocabulary. It is the unit of design.

ACCELERATE

How quickly is learning becoming useful capability?

Capability is never static.

The organization acts. People learn. Conditions change. Technology changes. Customers respond. People improvise. Some practices work better than expected. Others fail. New knowledge appears.

The question becomes: How quickly is the organization turning what it is learning into improved capability?

Learning Velocity is not about doing everything faster.

It is about reducing unnecessary distance between: Experience and reflection. Reflection and insight. Insight and knowledge movement. Knowledge and experimentation. Experimentation and adoption. Adoption and continuous refinement.

The objective is not hurried learning.

It is learning that becomes useful while it still matters.

Catalyst Questions

Where is learning waiting?

Who knows something that others need?

Where does useful experience disappear?

What takes too long to travel?

Where could we experiment sooner?

What have people learned from using what we designed?

What should change because of what we now know?

Useful Catalyst Instruments

Learning Velocity Map™
Identify where learning slows or stops.

Learning Velocity Accelerator Kit™
Identify practical ways to shorten unnecessary delays in learning and adaptation.

Knowledge Movement Map™
Identify where knowledge movement itself is the constraint.

Catalyst Caution

Do not confuse velocity with speed. Some things should be slowed down: judgment, reflection, ethical consideration, governance, difficult conversations. The objective is to remove unnecessary delay, not necessary thought.

REFLECT

What did we learn—and what does it change?

Many organizational initiatives end with implementation.

Catalyst work does not.

Catalysts ask: What capability actually grew? What surprised us? What became newly visible? What did we misunderstand? What happened that we did not anticipate? What should we stop doing? What should we refine? What should we try next?

Reflection is not the end of the cycle.

It changes what we are able to observe next.

That is why continuous refinement may be one of the largest departures from traditional development.

We once designed something, launched it, evaluated it, and eventually updated it.

In a Quicksilver World, the people using what we create continually generate new knowledge about how it should work.

The system must be able to learn from them.

Catalyst Questions

What happened?

What did we expect to happen?

What surprised us?

What assumptions proved wrong?

What became possible?

What became more difficult?

What do we know now that we didn't know before?

What will we try next?

Useful Catalyst Instruments

Catalyst Reflection Journal™
Turn experience into learning about the work and about your own Catalyst practice.

Catalyst Development Experiment™
Reflect on a deliberate attempt to work differently and decide what to try next.

Catalyst Field Notes™
Return to earlier observations and see whether they now mean something different.

Catalyst Caution

Reflection without consequence becomes ritual. The question is not simply: What did we learn? It is: What will be different because we learned it?

THE CYCLE IS NOT THE WORK

There is an obvious danger in drawing six words with arrows between them.

Someone will turn them into six steps.

Please don't.

Observe → Understand → Convene → Design → Accelerate → Reflect is not a prescription for how every Catalyst assignment should proceed.

Sometimes you should begin by convening.

Sometimes someone has already done the analysis.

Sometimes a useful experiment is the fastest way to understand the problem.

Sometimes reflection reveals that you need to observe again.

Sometimes design and acceleration occur simultaneously.

Sometimes the correct response is simply to provide the expertise someone asked for.

The sequence matters far less than the discipline.

Experienced Catalysts become increasingly fluent in moving among these activities. They learn when to slow down and when to accelerate, when to observe and when to intervene, when to convene and when to decide, when to design and when to let something emerge.

That judgment grows not because they memorize the cycle.

It grows because they repeatedly practice the discipline.

CHOOSING AN INSTRUMENT

The instruments in this book are not steps in a methodology.

They are aids to thinking and working.

Use one when it helps.

Don't use one because the model says you should.

A simple question may be more useful than a canvas.

A conversation may accomplish more than a map.

Direct assistance may be more useful than either.

And sometimes the best instrument is a blank sheet of paper.

A useful way to choose is simply to ask:

If I need to…	**I might use…**
Notice without prematurely concluding	Catalyst Field Notes™
Look broadly for emerging organizational signals	Organizational Awareness Scan™
Consider capabilities the organization may need	Capability Outlook™
Understand a capability more clearly	Capability Map™
See the system producing capability	Capability System tools / Capability Design Canvas™
Understand where knowledge is trapped	Knowledge Movement Map™
Find where learning is slowing	Learning Velocity Map™
Improve learning velocity	Learning Velocity Accelerator Kit™
Determine what question could move thinking	Catalyst Questions™
Bring people together to think purposefully	Catalyst Conversations™
Design learning-rich work experiences	Experience Design Canvas™
Reflect on experience	Catalyst Reflection Journal™
Develop my own Catalyst practice	Catalyst Development Guide™ / Catalyst Development Experiment™

This collection is not complete.

I hope it never is.

Every profession develops tools as its practice matures. Catalysts should do the same. Your situation may require an instrument that does not exist in this book.

Create it.

If it works, share it.

If others improve it, even better.

That is how a professional discipline grows.

USING THE CATALYST WAY OF WORKING

If you are confronting an organizational challenge and are uncertain where to begin, you might simply scan the six questions:

OBSERVE

What is happening?

UNDERSTAND

What is producing what we see?

CONVENE

Who needs to think together?

DESIGN

What would make capability more likely to emerge?

ACCELERATE

How quickly is learning becoming useful capability?

REFLECT

What did we learn—and what does it change?

One of those questions will usually feel more important than the others.

Start there.

Then follow the work.

A LIVING DISCIPLINE

When I began writing this book, I thought I was describing a new professional identity.

Looking back, I realize I was also describing a professional discipline.

Not a methodology.

Not a certification.

Not a competency model.

A recognizable way of approaching the work.

Catalysts observe before assuming.

They seek to understand systems.

They bring together people and perspectives that need one another.

They design for capability.

They help learning move faster when faster matters.

They reflect, refine, and begin again.

And, as we explored in the final chapters, none of us arrives fully formed as a Catalyst. We develop this way of working through practice—and we help others develop it through practice as well.

The Catalyst Way of Working is simply an attempt to make that discipline visible.

It will evolve.

It should.

The organizations we serve will change. Technology will change. The capabilities they require will change. And future Catalysts will discover practices and instruments that I could not possibly anticipate.

That is not a flaw in the model.

It is the point.

So treat this Field Guide accordingly.

Use what helps.

Change what doesn't.

Create what is missing.

And keep learning from what happens next.

SECTION VIII

WHAT DO I DO NOW?

A situation-based guide to choosing a Catalyst move

Catalyst Playbook™

© 2026 John Coné. All rights reserved. Permission is granted to individuals and organizations to download, reproduce, distribute internally, and adapt this resource for their own professional development and internal organizational use, provided that attribution to John Coné and CatalystLeadershipTools.com is retained. Commercial resale, commercial redistribution, and incorporation into products or services offered for sale require prior written permission from the copyright holder.