Catalyst Playbook™

Companion to Becoming a Catalyst | John Coné

THE CATALYST PLAYBOOK™

What to Do When You Want to Help Something Move

Purpose

Catalyst work rarely announces itself.

Nobody walks into your office and says: We need someone to catalyze this.

Instead, someone asks for a training program. A problem keeps recurring. A meeting goes in circles. Two groups are solving the same problem without knowing it. A new technology changes the work. People have valuable experience but aren't learning much from it. An organization has plenty of knowledge, but it isn't reaching the people who need it. Everyone agrees something needs to change, but nobody knows what to try. Or perhaps you simply notice something important that others haven't noticed yet.

The Catalyst Playbook™ is designed for those moments.

It is not a sequence. It is not a methodology. It is not a checklist you must complete. And it is not a substitute for judgment.

It is a field guide to help you answer three questions:

What is happening here?

What Catalyst move might help?

What should I do next?

First: Does This Need a Catalyst?

Is the need already clear? If people know what needs to be done, perhaps they simply need to do it.

Is the solution known? If an effective solution already exists, use it.

Does someone need expertise? If you know the answer and the answer is what they need, give it.

Does something simply need to be delivered? Deliver it well.

Is a decision required? Don't prolong inquiry when someone needs to decide.

Being a Catalyst does not mean making every problem more complicated.

Use Catalyst moves when they create value—not because you have learned how to make them.

WHEN YOU NOTICE SOMETHING CHANGING…

Catalyst move: SENSE

- a technology is altering the work
- customers are behaving differently
- an old assumption seems less reliable
- an unusual pattern keeps appearing
- people are improvising around an established process

• a capability that once mattered seems less important

• something that wasn't possible before suddenly is

Don't rush to solve.

Get closer.

Observe.

Talk to people doing the work.

Look for weak signals.

Notice exceptions.

Ask:

• What are we seeing now that we weren't seeing before?

• What doesn't fit our current explanation?

• If this continues, what might it mean?

You may want: Organizational Awareness Scan™; Catalyst Questions™ — OBSERVE

Smallest useful move: Talk with three people who see the change from different vantage points.

WHEN SOMEONE BRINGS YOU A SOLUTION...

Catalyst move: DIAGNOSE

• "We need training."

• "We need a new competency model."

• "We need a leadership program."

• "We need managers to communicate better."

• "We need an AI course."

The request may be right. But the proposed solution is not the same thing as the problem.

Ask what is happening before deciding what should be done.

Look at the situation. The performer. Requirements. Consequences. Feedback. The system surrounding the work.

Ask:

• What are we trying to accomplish?

• What is preventing it now?

• What else could explain what we're seeing?

• If we solved the problem exactly as it has been defined, would we get the result we want?

You may want: Catalyst Questions™ — UNDERSTAND + CHALLENGE

Smallest useful move: Observe the work before designing the solution.

WHEN THE PROBLEM SEEMS BIGGER THAN ONE PART OF THE ORGANIZATION...

Catalyst move: SEE THE SYSTEM

• Different functions own different pieces.

• Nobody sees the whole thing.

• The solution in one area creates a problem somewhere else.

• People are optimizing their piece of the system.

Move beyond the immediate event.

Look upstream.

Look downstream.

Ask what conditions are producing the behavior.

Ask:

• What is the system encouraging people to do?

• Where else is this pattern showing up?

• What happens before this? What happens afterward?

• Who experiences consequences we aren't seeing?

You may want: Catalyst Questions™ — UNDERSTAND + CONNECT

Smallest useful move: Follow one real piece of work across its organizational boundaries.

WHEN THE KNOWLEDGE EXISTS—BUT NOT HERE...

Catalyst move: CONNECT

• Someone elsewhere has solved this.

• Another team has relevant experience.

• An expert knows something the group doesn't.

• The customer sees something you don't.

• People are reinventing answers that already exist.

Don't automatically create content.

Find the knowledge.

Connect the people.

Ask:

• Who already knows something we need?

• Who sees this differently?

• Who is missing from this conversation?

• Where else might this be happening?

You may want: Catalyst Questions™ — CONNECT

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Smallest useful move: Introduce two people. Then get out of the way.

WHEN THE RIGHT PEOPLE AREN'T TALKING…

Catalyst move: CONVENE

- The knowledge is distributed.
- Perspectives conflict.
- No one person has the answer.
- The issue crosses boundaries.
- Something new needs to emerge rather than simply be communicated.

Bring together the people whose knowledge, experience, authority, or perspective needs to collide.

But don't convene merely to "get everyone in the room."

Design the conversation.

Ask:

- **What needs to be different at the end of this conversation?**
- **Whose thinking needs to encounter whose?**
- **What question could change the conversation?**

You may want: Catalyst Conversations™ — CONVENE; Conversation Design Canvas™; Catalyst Questions Card Set™

Smallest useful move: Create one conversation that otherwise would not happen.

WHEN EVERYONE AGREES TOO QUICKLY…

Catalyst move: QUESTION

- The group has settled on an explanation.
- An assumption has become invisible.
- People are answering the question they were given without examining it.
- The inherited way of doing something is constraining what people can imagine.

Interrupt certainty without becoming the person who reflexively disagrees.

Ask:

- **What are we assuming?**
- **What if the opposite were true?**
- **Are we solving the right problem?**
- **If we hadn't inherited this, would we create it this way today?**

You may want: Catalyst Questions™ — CHALLENGE; Catalyst Questions Card Set™

Smallest useful move: Ask one question. Then listen.

WHEN PEOPLE ARE STUCK INSIDE WHAT ALREADY EXISTS…

Catalyst move: IMAGINE

- The conversation is about improving the existing program.
- Making the process faster.
- Adding features.
- Fixing deficiencies.
- The group is constrained by yesterday's possibilities.

Create permission to consider what could be different.

Ask:

- **What becomes possible now that wasn't possible before?**
- **What would we design today?**
- **What would have to be true for this to work?**

You may want: Catalyst Questions™ — IMAGINE

Smallest useful move: Temporarily remove one constraint everyone has assumed is permanent. See what becomes possible.

WHEN NOBODY KNOWS THE RIGHT ANSWER…

Catalyst move: EXPERIMENT

- There are several plausible possibilities.
- The environment is changing.
- Evidence is incomplete.
- Debate isn't reducing uncertainty.
- People want certainty before acting.

Don't ask: Which idea can we prove is right?

Ask what is the smallest thing we could try that would teach us something important.

Then: Try. Watch. Learn. Adjust.

Ask:

- **What is the smallest thing we could try that would teach us something important?**

You may want: Catalyst Questions™ — IMAGINE + ACTIVATE

Smallest useful move: Run the smallest experiment whose result could change what you do next.

WHEN PEOPLE ARE WORKING BUT NOT LEARNING ENOUGH FROM IT…

Catalyst move: ENRICH THE WORK

- People encounter customers.
- Solve problems.

- Make decisions.
- Use AI.
- Work with experts.
- Handle exceptions.
- Complete projects.
- And then move on.

The work is producing experience without producing as much capability as it could.

Don't automatically add a learning activity.

Ask what learning is already latent in the work.

Ask:

- **What could people be learning from doing this?**
- **Where is that learning being lost?**
- **How is AI changing what people learn—or no longer learn—from doing the work?**
- **What is the smallest change that would make this work more learning-rich?**

You may want: Experience Design Canvas™

Smallest useful move: Find one place where useful learning is being lost and change that—not everything.

WHEN SOMEBODY HAS LEARNED SOMETHING USEFUL...

Catalyst move: MOVE KNOWLEDGE

- A team solved an unusual problem.
- Someone discovered a better approach.
- A project produced an unexpected insight.
- One part of the organization has developed expertise another part needs.

Don't immediately turn it into a course.

Ask:

- **Who could use this right now?**
- **What is the shortest path between the person who knows and the person who needs to know?**
- **Does the knowledge need packaging—or simply movement?**

You may want: Catalyst Questions™ — CONNECT + ACTIVATE

Smallest useful move: Help one useful piece of knowledge reach one person who can use it.

WHEN AN INSIGHT NEEDS TO BECOME ACTION...

Catalyst move: ACTIVATE

- The conversation was good.
- People learned something.

• A new possibility emerged.

• And now everyone is about to return to work.

Ask:

• What should we try?

• What learning can we release now?

• What question do we still need to answer before we move?

• What changes because of what we now know?

You may want: Catalyst Questions™ — ACTIVATE

Smallest useful move: Make sure someone does something differently because of what just happened.

WHEN THE ORGANIZATION NEEDS CAPABILITY—NOT ANOTHER PROGRAM…

Catalyst move: BUILD THE CAPABILITY SYSTEM

• The need is persistent.

• Multiple forces shape performance.

• A course alone won't create the required capability.

• Learning needs to happen across work, people, systems, tools, experience, and formal development.

Ask what people or the organization must become able to do.

Then look beyond learning provision.

What conditions make that capability possible? What reinforces it? What prevents it? Where does knowledge come from? Where does practice happen? Where does feedback occur?

Ask:

• What must people or the organization become able to do?

You may want: Capability Design Canvas™

Smallest useful move: Stop asking “What should we teach?” long enough to ask “What must become possible?”

WHEN YOU ARE BECOMING THE PERSON EVERYONE DEPENDS ON…

Catalyst move: BUILD MORE CATALYSTS

• People call you to facilitate.

• You make the connections.

• You ask the questions.

• You see the patterns.

• You are becoming very good at Catalyst work.

• Be careful.

Give some of it away.

Invite others to ask the questions.

Put the cards in their hands.

Let someone else convene.

Make your reasoning visible.

Step back.

Ask:

• What am I doing that someone else could begin learning to do?

You may want: Catalyst Development Guide™; Catalyst Questions Card Set™; Catalyst Conversations™

Smallest useful move: The next time you could make the Catalyst move yourself, help someone else make it.

WHEN YOUR DAYS ARE FULL AND THERE IS NO ROOM FOR ANY OF THIS…

Catalyst move: CHOOSE

• Your portfolio is full.

• Much of the work matters.

• Your boss expects it.

• Stakeholders rely on you.

• You cannot simply announce that you are becoming a Catalyst and stop doing everything else.

Look across the portfolio.

Ask:

• Where would being a Catalyst actually add value?

• What should I simply continue doing well?

• What could I reduce, delegate, redesign, automate, or stop?

• What important issue isn't receiving Catalyst attention?

You may want: Catalyst Portfolio™

Smallest useful move: Change one thing in the portfolio. Not the whole portfolio.

The Playbook at a Glance

When…	Catalyst Move	Ask…	Go To…
Something is changing	SENSE	What are we seeing?	Organizational Awareness Scan
Someone brings a solution	DIAGNOSE	What is really producing this?	Catalyst Questions
The issue crosses boundaries	SEE THE SYSTEM	What is the system producing?	Catalyst Questions
Knowledge exists elsewhere	CONNECT	Who already knows?	Catalyst Questions
The right people aren't talking	CONVENE	Who needs to encounter whom?	Conversation Design Canvas / Catalyst Conversations
Everyone agrees too quickly	QUESTION	What are we assuming?	Catalyst Questions

When...	Catalyst Move	Ask...	Go To...
Thinking is constrained by today	IMAGINE	What becomes possible now?	Catalyst Questions
Nobody knows the answer	EXPERIMENT	What could we try to learn?	Catalyst Questions
Work isn't producing enough learning	ENRICH WORK	Where is learning being lost?	Experience Design Canvas
Useful knowledge isn't moving	MOVE KNOWLEDGE	Who could use this?	Catalyst Questions
Insight needs movement	ACTIVATE	What changes because of this?	Catalyst Questions
The organization needs lasting capability	BUILD CAPABILITY	What must become possible?	Capability Design Canvas
Everything depends on you	BUILD MORE CATALYSTS	What can I give away?	Catalyst Development Guide / Card Set
Your portfolio is full	CHOOSE	Where does Catalyst work add value?	Catalyst Portfolio

Sometimes, Do Nothing

There should be one final move in the Playbook. It may be the hardest one.

You notice something. You could ask a question. You could make a connection. You could convene people. You could suggest an experiment. You could intervene.

But should you?

Sometimes people are already learning. The system is already adjusting. Someone else is already making the connection. A team needs room to struggle. The issue isn't important enough. Or your intervention would simply add complexity.

A Catalyst does not prove value by constantly catalyzing.

This does not need me.

Watch. Stay curious. Be available. And leave it alone.

The Catalyst's Pocket Playbook

What am I noticing?

What is really happening?

Who or what needs connecting?

What question might change the thinking?

What could we try?

What learning should move?

What could someone else do instead of me?

And does this need a Catalyst at all?

A Catalyst Doesn't Follow the Playbook

The purpose of a playbook is to make useful moves easier to recognize.

But Catalyst work is contextual.

The right question may not be on a card. The right move may not appear on this page. Several moves may happen at once.

You may begin by sensing and discover that what is needed is connection. You may convene people and discover that the real need is diagnosis. An experiment may reveal that nothing needs to change.

And sometimes the most useful thing you can do is simply notice something and wait.

The goal is not to become proficient at using Catalyst tools.

The goal is to become increasingly able to recognize what the situation needs, where you can add value, and when someone else should take it from here.

Use the Playbook until you no longer need the Playbook.

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