Ignition Point Finder

Companion to Catalyst Leadership | John Coné

Find where a small change could alter what becomes possible

The System Scan will likely reveal several things you could change. That creates a new problem. Where should you intervene?

Leaders often answer that question by choosing:

- The most visible problem.
- The biggest problem.
- The problem attracting the most executive attention.
- The easiest thing to change.
- The thing they control.
- The solution they already know how to implement.

Any of those may be reasonable. But the Catalyst Leader is looking for something more particular:

Where could a focused intervention release a disproportionate increase in both performance and generative capability?

That is an ignition point.

An ignition point is not necessarily the root cause. It is not necessarily the largest problem. And it is not necessarily the place where the organization ultimately needs the most change.

Rather, it is a place where changing something important can change what becomes possible elsewhere in the system.

BEGIN WITH THE PROBLEM

What consequential problem or opportunity are you examining?

What did the System Scan cause you to see differently?

What are the most important conditions contributing to the current result?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

IDENTIFY POSSIBLE IGNITION POINTS

Resist the impulse to begin with solutions. Begin with places in the system where changing a condition might alter what people, teams, technologies, or the larger system are able and inclined to do.

Look especially for these possibilities.

CONNECTIONS

Where would connecting people, knowledge, experiences, disciplines, technologies, or parts of the organization change what becomes possible?

© 2026 John Coné | CatalystLeadershipTools.com

INFORMATION

Where is information missing, trapped, delayed, distorted, or reaching the wrong place?

What information moved closer to judgment could change behavior?

AUTHORITY

Where does a decision unnecessarily depend upon someone else?

Where might moving authority—or clarifying its boundaries—release intelligent action?

ASSUMPTIONS

What accepted belief is shaping the system?

What might become possible if that assumption were challenged?

INCENTIVES AND CONSEQUENCES

Where is the system encouraging behavior different from the behavior it says it wants?

What might change if the consequences changed?

EXPERIMENTATION

Where is uncertainty being treated as something to analyze indefinitely rather than something that could be explored through a bounded experiment?

What could we learn cheaply, quickly, and safely?

LEARNING

Where is useful experience being consumed rather than converted into learning?

Where could making learning visible or movable change more than the immediate situation?

CHOOSE THREE CANDIDATES

You may now have many possible interventions. To start, reduce them to no more than three.

Phrase each as a change in a condition, not as a project or program.

EXAMPLES

Instead of: Create a knowledge-sharing platform.
Try: Make relevant experience easier to find when someone encounters an unfamiliar problem.

Instead of: Launch manager training.
Try: Give managers repeated opportunities to exercise consequential judgment within safe boundaries.

Instead of: Improve communication.
Try: Move customer information closer to the people making customer decisions.

Your Three Candidates

Candidate A

_____

Candidate B

_____

© 2026 John Coné | CatalystLeadershipTools.com

Candidate C

TEST EACH CANDIDATE FOR LEVERAGE

An ignition point should do more than improve one thing.

For each candidate, work through five questions.

CANDIDATE A

1. IMMEDIATE MOVEMENT

If we changed this condition, how much could it improve the problem or opportunity we are addressing now?

LOW 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 HIGH

Why?

_____

2. RIPPLE

If this condition changed, how much might the effects spread to other parts of the current problem or system?

LOW 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 HIGH

Where else might the effects appear?

_____

3. GENERATIVE RETURN

Would changing this condition leave the organization more capable of recognizing, responding to, or learning from other unfamiliar problems in the future?

LOW 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 HIGH

What new capacity might remain after this problem is solved?

_____

4. TRACTABILITY

Can we actually influence this condition without first changing the entire organization?

LOW 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 HIGH

What could we realistically change?

_____

5. LEARNING VALUE

Even if our intervention does not work as expected, could trying it teach us something important about the system?

LOW 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 HIGH

What might we learn?

_____

CANDIDATE B

Immediate Movement

LOW 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 HIGH

Why? _____

Ripple

LOW 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 HIGH

Where else might the effects appear? _____

Generative Return

LOW 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 HIGH

What new capacity might remain? _____

Tractability

LOW 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 HIGH

What could we realistically change? _____

Learning Value

LOW 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 HIGH

What might we learn? _____

CANDIDATE C

Immediate Movement

LOW 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 HIGH

Why? _____

Ripple

LOW 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 HIGH

Where else might the effects appear? _____

Generative Return

LOW 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 HIGH

What new capacity might remain? _____

Tractability

LOW 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 HIGH

What could we realistically change? _____

Learning Value

LOW 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 HIGH

What might we learn? _____

DON'T ADD THE SCORES

The numbers are there to force comparison, not to produce an answer.

An intervention scoring 21 is not necessarily a better ignition point than one scoring 20.

Instead, put the three candidates side by side.

Then look at the pattern.

Ask:

Which candidate could materially affect the problem we actually need to solve?

_____

Which could cause improvement to spread through other parts of the current system or problem?

_____

Which could leave behind capability useful for unfamiliar problems we have not yet encountered?

_____

Which can we actually touch?

_____

Which would teach us the most about what to do next?

_____

LOOK FOR THE DOUBLE RETURN

An attractive intervention may improve performance without increasing generative capability. Another may create learning but contribute little to the result the organization actually needs. The strongest ignition points often offer both.

Can this intervention help us solve today's problem AND make us more capable of solving problems we cannot yet anticipate? What is the performance return? What is the generative return? If you cannot describe both, reconsider whether this is a generative ignition point—or whether the situation responsibly calls for performance improvement alone.

TEST FOR DEPENDENCE

There is one more question.

Suppose the intervention works exactly as intended. What will become less dependent upon the leader—or any single source of intelligence?

Perhaps people will be able to find expertise without escalation. Information might reach the point of judgment without being routed through hierarchy. Teams will be able to run bounded experiments without executive permission and learning will travel without a leader carrying it. And maybe human and machine intelligence will combine without every interaction being orchestrated from above.

If nothing becomes less dependent upon a central source, you may have found an effective intervention. But you may not yet have found a generative one.

NAME THE IGNITION POINT

Complete this sentence:

If we change _____,

we believe it could improve _____

while increasing our capacity to _____.

Now make it more precise.

Our ignition point is:

DON'T BUILD THE SOLUTION YET

Finding the ignition point does not tell you exactly what to do. It does tell you where to work. And that difference can be important.

Suppose you conclude that relevant expertise needs to become easier to find. The answer might be a technology platform. Or it might be a network or changed role. It could be an AI agent, a new information practice, a different meeting, a change in decision rights, or something nobody has yet imagined.

Be careful not to confuse the ignition point with the intervention. First identify the condition worth changing. Then ask: What conditions would allow the system to behave differently?

That is the work of Tool 3.

But first, let's see what the search for an ignition point looks like in practice.

THE IGNITION POINT FINDER IN PRACTICE

Return to the company from the System Scan.

Regional managers repeatedly escalate unusual customer pricing decisions to headquarters. The System Scan revealed that the organization had distributed formal authority without equally distributing information, experience, confidence, and access to relevant knowledge.

It produced three candidates.

CANDIDATE A

Move more enterprise customer and profitability context toward regional managers.

CANDIDATE B

Make unusual pricing decisions—and the reasoning behind them—visible across regions.

CANDIDATE C

Make it easy for a manager facing an unfamiliar situation to find colleagues who have encountered analogous problems.

Now test them.

We do not add the scores. Instead, we look at what the comparison reveals.

Candidate A

Moving more information toward regional managers could improve immediate decision quality.

But information alone may not develop judgment. Managers could simply receive more data while remaining uncertain about how experienced people interpret it.

Candidate B

Making unusual decisions and their reasoning visible could do more. Managers would gain access not merely to answers but to accumulated organizational experience. Patterns across customer situations might become visible. The organization could learn from cases currently treated as isolated transactions.

Candidate C

Connecting managers facing unfamiliar situations could reduce dependence upon headquarters and allow distributed experience to become useful at the moment of need.

It could also help managers discover that apparently unique problems have useful analogues elsewhere.

Candidates B and C therefore appear particularly promising.

But perhaps they are not actually separate.

The deeper condition may be:

Experience relevant to unfamiliar customer decisions exists across the organization but cannot easily be found, connected, or reused when judgment is required.

That reframing reveals a possible ignition point.

THE IGNITION POINT

Make distributed experience accessible at the moment unfamiliar judgment is required.

Notice what happened in this example.

There was not a decision to create a database or to launch a community of practice. There is no plan to purchase an AI platform. The pricing organization was not redesigned.

But we have identified a condition worth changing.

If we can make distributed experience accessible at the moment of judgment, we may:

- Improve current pricing decisions.
- Reduce unnecessary escalation.
- Develop managerial judgment.
- Reveal patterns in changing customer behavior.
- Allow experience to travel across regions.
- Reduce dependence upon headquarters.
- Create an infrastructure useful for unfamiliar decisions beyond pricing.

That is the double return.

The ignition point tells us where to touch the system.

It does not yet tell us exactly what conditions to create there.

That is where we go next.

© 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.