# Enduring vs. Generative Capability Test

*Companion to Catalyst Leadership* | *John Coné*

*Classify the capability created by this experience*

What Kind of Capability Did We Actually Create?

After consequential work, reflection may reveal new capability created by the experience.

Now you can ask a more demanding question: What kind of capability did we actually create? Did we become better able to perform something we now know how to do? Or did we become better able to develop capabilities for situations whose answers we do not yet know? Both are valuable; but they are not the same.

## TWO DIFFERENT RETURNS

### ENDURING CAPABILITY

Enduring capability is the ability to perform a known or now-understood task reliably without continuing dependence upon the leader or original problem solvers. It allows the organization to say: We know how to do this now. So the capability persists.

### GENERATIVE CAPABILITY

Generative capability is the capacity to develop new capabilities as unfamiliar circumstances reveal the need for them. It allows the organization to say: We are becoming better at figuring out how to do things we do not yet know how to do. This capability produces.

Enduring capability persists. Generative capability produces. The distinction is not between good and bad capability. Organizations need both.

The question is what the work actually left behind.

## BEGIN WITH THE CAPABILITY

From the Capability Extraction Canvas—or directly from the work—complete this sentence:

Because of this experience, we are now better able to…

Now test that capability.

## TEST 1 — CAN WE DO IT AGAIN?

Imagine essentially the same challenge occurs six months from now.

Could people handle it without recreating the solution from scratch?

Does the relevant knowledge still exist?

Can the capability survive changes in personnel?

Can others exercise it without depending upon the people who originally solved the problem?

Have useful routines, judgment, relationships, technologies, or practices remained behind?

Our answer:

YES / PARTLY / NO

Evidence:

If the answer is yes, you may have created enduring capability. But don't stop there.

## TEST 2 — CAN WE HANDLE A DIFFERENT PROBLEM?

Now imagine that the next challenge is not the same. The circumstances have changed. The people involved may be different. The technology may be different. The problem may come from somewhere you did not anticipate. The answer that worked last time may no longer work.

Ask:

Did this experience make us better able to confront that unfamiliar situation?

Our answer:

YES / PARTLY / NO

Evidence:

If the answer is yes, you may have created generative capability.

Now determine why.

## TESTS 3–8 — DID WE IMPROVE THE GENERATIVE MECHANISMS?

Instead of repeating a second full system assessment, use these six tests to examine the specific capability left behind by this experience. For each, answer YES / PARTLY / NO and cite evidence.

SENSE & INTERPRET — Can we now notice and interpret emerging needs or weak signals more effectively?

YES / PARTLY / NO  Evidence: _____

CONNECT — Can we find, combine, and access relevant people, knowledge, and technologies more readily?

YES / PARTLY / NO  Evidence: _____

MOBILIZE — Can we assemble people, resources, and authority around unfamiliar needs more effectively?

YES / PARTLY / NO  Evidence: _____

EXPERIMENT — Can we test assumptions and discover responsible answers when none is known?

YES / PARTLY / NO  Evidence: _____

LEARN — Can we convert experience and feedback into useful changed action more reliably?

YES / PARTLY / NO  Evidence: _____

SPREAD & EVOLVE — Can learning travel, recombine, and evolve beyond the original problem?

YES / PARTLY / NO  Evidence: _____

## NOW MAKE THE DISTINCTION

Review your answers.

## MOSTLY ENDURING

The strongest evidence is that:

We can repeat what worked.

Others can perform it reliably.

The capability no longer depends upon the original leader or problem solvers.

We have retained useful knowledge, routines, practices, technology, or judgment.

Complete:

We created enduring capability because we can now…

### GENERATIVE AS WELL

There is evidence not merely that we can repeat the solution, but that the experience strengthened our ability to:

### SENSE → CONNECT → MOBILIZE → EXPERIMENT → LEARN → SPREAD & EVOLVE

Complete:

We increased generative capability because the next time we encounter something unfamiliar, we will be better able to…

### PERHAPS NEITHER

Do not assume that successful work necessarily produced capability.

It is possible that:

The problem was solved but the capability remained with one person.

The leader supplied the answer.

Outside expertise solved the problem without transferring capability.

A temporary workaround disappeared with the problem.

People followed a process but did not develop judgment.

Technology produced the result while creating a new dependency.

The experience generated useful learning that was never converted into capability.

Ask:

If the same people, leader, consultant, technology, or unusual circumstances were removed, what would actually remain?

If the answer is “very little,” the work may have produced performance without producing much capability.

That is important to know.

### WATCH FOR FALSE GENERATIVITY

Some things can look generative without actually being so.

### WE CREATED A PLAYBOOK

Useful—but does it help people deal with situations the playbook does not cover?

### WE BUILT A PLATFORM

Useful—but does it increase people's ability to discover, connect, judge, learn, or create?

### WE DELEGATED DECISIONS

Useful—but did judgment develop, or did dependence simply move somewhere else?

### WE DOCUMENTED THE LESSONS

Useful—but can anyone find, interpret, adapt, and recombine them?

### WE IMPLEMENTED AI

Potentially powerful—but did the system become more capable of generating new capability, or simply more dependent upon a different source of answers?

### WE TRAINED PEOPLE

Useful—but did learning become capability, and can that capability evolve when the situation changes?

The test is not what was implemented.

The test is:

What can the system now generate that it could not generate before?

_____

## THE UNFAMILIAR PROBLEM TEST

Here is the simplest test of all.

Imagine an important problem appears next year that you cannot describe today.

You do not know:

What caused it.

What expertise it will require.

What technology will add value.

Who will need to be involved.

What solution will work.

Now ask:

Because of the work we just completed, is this organization better equipped to figure out what to do?

YES / PARTLY / NO

Why?

If you can explain convincingly why, you have evidence of generative capability.

## WHAT DID WE LEAVE BEHIND?

Complete both statements separately.

### ENDURING CAPABILITY

We are now better able to repeatedly…

### GENERATIVE CAPABILITY

We are now better able to discover how to…

Do not force yourself to complete both. The work may have produced one, both, or neither.

## THE CATALYST RETURN

Now return to the original problem or opportunity.

What immediate result did we produce?

_____

What enduring capability did we leave behind?

_____

What generative capability did we leave behind?

_____

This reveals the full return from the work. Direct can produce the first. Empower can produce the first and second. Catalyst Leadership seeks the possibility of all three:

## PERFORMANCE + ENDURING CAPABILITY + GENERATIVE CAPABILITY

Not because every problem must produce all three. But because consequential work can often produce more than the result that caused us to undertake it.

## ONE FINAL TEST

Ask:

Did we merely become better at solving this kind of problem—or did we become better at developing whatever capability the next unfamiliar problem requires?

The first is enduring capability. The second is generative capability. Both have value, but in a Quicksilver World, the second increasingly determines whether the organization can continue to create the first.

## THE NEXT QUESTION

This test examined what one consequential experience left behind. But generative capability is not ultimately demonstrated by one experience. The larger question is whether the system itself can do this repeatedly:

How well can this organization recognize emerging needs, mobilize around them, discover effective responses, learn from experience, and spread what it learns—and do so with sufficient capability, inclination, and velocity?

That is the purpose of the Generative Capability Assessment.

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