# Generative Capability Assessment

*Companion to Catalyst Leadership* | *John Coné*

*Periodic system-level review—not an after-action score*

DISTINCTION: The preceding test asks what kind of capability one experience created. This assessment asks whether a defined system can repeatedly generate new capability as circumstances change. It is best used periodically, with evidence from multiple situations—not after every action.

How Well Can This System Repeatedly Create New Capability?

The previous tools looked back at consequential work. You asked what you learned. You identified capability that emerged, and you considered whether that capability was enduring, generative, or both.

Now let's step back.

The larger question is not whether one experience produced generative capability. It is this: How capable is this system of generating new capability repeatedly? A generative organization does not know in advance every capability it will need. It does not have to.

It has developed the capacity to recognize emerging needs, mobilize around them, discover effective responses, learn from experience, and spread what it learns. And it can do those things repeatedly as circumstances change.

This assessment helps you examine that capacity.

## ASSESS A REAL SYSTEM

Do not rate "the organization" unless that is truly the useful unit of analysis. You might assess:

- A business unit.
- A function.
- A team.
- A geographic operation.
- A product organization.
- A customer-facing system.
- A cross-functional network.
- The organization as a whole.

Choose a system large enough that generating capability matters, but specific enough that you can answer the questions from evidence.

The system I am assessing:

_____

Why this system?

_____

What changing or unfamiliar demands is this system likely to face?

## RATE WHAT THE SYSTEM CAN ACTUALLY DO

For each statement, use the following scale:

1 — Rarely true
2 — Occasionally true
3 — Inconsistently true
4 — Usually true
5 — Reliably true

Rate the system as it operates today, not as it is intended to operate.

Use evidence wherever possible.

## 1. SENSE & INTERPRET

Can the system recognize when something important is changing?

A generative system notices emerging needs before someone at the top has completely defined them.

Rate each statement.

We notice meaningful changes in our environment early enough to respond.

1 2 3 4 5

People can surface weak signals, anomalies, emerging needs, and unexpected information.

1 2 3 4 5

Information that challenges existing assumptions receives serious attention.

1 2 3 4 5

We can distinguish a meaningful change from ordinary noise.

1 2 3 4 5

People and technologies together help us see patterns that either might miss alone.

1 2 3 4 5

When circumstances change, we reconsider the assumptions underlying what we currently do.

1 2 3 4 5

Evidence:

What have you seen the system detect early—or fail to detect?

## 2. CONNECT

Can the system bring together the intelligence an unfamiliar problem requires?

The knowledge needed may already exist.

But it may exist in different places, people, technologies, disciplines, or experiences.

Rate each statement.

People can find relevant expertise outside their immediate group.

1 2 3 4 5

Knowledge moves across organizational boundaries when the work requires it.

1 2 3 4 5

People with different perspectives can be brought together around unfamiliar problems.

1 2 3 4 5

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Relevant experience from elsewhere can be discovered when needed.

1 2 3 4 5

External knowledge can be incorporated when internal knowledge is insufficient.

1 2 3 4 5

Technology helps connect people, knowledge, data, and experience that would otherwise remain disconnected.

1 2 3 4 5

Evidence:

Where have useful connections occurred—or failed to occur?

## 3. MOBILIZE

Can the system organize around something it did not anticipate?

Seeing the need is not enough. The system must be able to move.

Rate each statement.

People can organize around an emerging need without waiting for extensive top-down orchestration.

1 2 3 4 5

Resources can move toward important new problems or opportunities.

1 2 3 4 5

Decision authority can move close enough to the work for intelligent action.

1 2 3 4 5

Organizational boundaries do not routinely prevent the right people from working together.

1 2 3 4 5

People understand enough of the larger context to exercise responsible judgment.

1 2 3 4 5

Human and technological capabilities can be assembled quickly around new needs.

1 2 3 4 5

Evidence:

How easily has the system mobilized around recent unfamiliar needs?

## 4. EXPERIMENT

Can the system discover answers it does not already possess?

When the answer is unknown, the system must be able to learn through action.

Rate each statement.

People can acknowledge uncertainty without being expected to pretend that they know the answer.

1 2 3 4 5

Important assumptions can be tested rather than merely debated.

1 2 3 4 5

People can conduct bounded experiments without unnecessary approval or delay.

1 2 3 4 5

Responsible experiments that do not succeed are treated as potential sources of learning rather than automatically as failures of performance.

1 2 3 4 5

Experiments produce information that affects subsequent decisions.

1 2 3 4 5

Technology expands the speed, range, or quality of responsible experimentation.

1 2 3 4 5

Evidence:

What happens here when the answer genuinely is not known?

## 5. LEARN

Can the system reliably turn experience into improved understanding and capability?

Experience alone does not create learning.

Rate each statement.

We examine consequential experiences closely enough to understand what they taught us.

1 2 3 4 5

We surface assumptions that proved wrong.

1 2 3 4 5

We learn from successes rather than merely celebrating them.

1 2 3 4 5

We learn from failures rather than merely correcting them.

1 2 3 4 5

Feedback reaches people quickly enough to influence subsequent action.

1 2 3 4 5

Learning changes what people can actually do—not merely what they know.

1 2 3 4 5

Evidence:

What recent experience actually changed subsequent capability?

## 6. SPREAD & EVOLVE

Can what is learned travel, recombine, and become useful somewhere else?

Learning that remains where it originated may improve local performance. Generative learning travels.

Rate each statement.

Useful learning can be discovered by people who were not part of the original experience.

1 2 3 4 5

Emerging and unfinished knowledge can travel without having to become a polished “best practice” first.

1 2 3 4 5

People can understand enough of the context behind a lesson to adapt rather than merely copy it.

1 2 3 4 5

Learning from one part of the organization regularly combines with knowledge or experience from elsewhere.

1 2 3 4 5

New capabilities can evolve as they encounter different circumstances.

1 2 3 4 5

Technology helps useful experience remain discoverable, accessible, and adaptable over time.

1 2 3 4 5

Evidence:

Where has learning traveled and evolved—or remained trapped?

## STEP BACK FROM THE SIX RATINGS

Do not begin by calculating an overall score. First look at the pattern.

For each mechanism, use your item ratings and evidence to make an overall judgment from 1 to 5.

The number is less important than the thinking behind it and the conversation it prompts.

## DON'T ADD THE SCORES

A system does not become generative because its average is high. Generativity depends on the connections between mechanisms. A system that senses change but cannot mobilize may see the future coming and still fail to respond. One that experiments but does not learn may generate activity rather than capability. A system that learns but cannot spread what it learns may create isolated pockets of excellence. And a system that connects knowledge but cannot move authority may produce insight without action.

Ask:

Where does the generative cycle break down?

Which weak mechanism most constrains the others?

_____

Which strong mechanism could we build upon?

## NOW APPLY THREE TESTS ACROSS THE ENTIRE SYSTEM

The six mechanisms tell you what the system must be able to do.

Three additional questions tell you whether it can do those things well enough, willingly enough, and quickly enough to matter.

## CAPABILITY — CAN WE?

Even if people want to respond, does the system possess the ability? Consider the people, knowledge, technologies, relationships, authority, and judgment needed for the system to function effectively across the six generative mechanisms.

### Ask:

- Do people have the necessary skills?

- Is relevant knowledge accessible?
- Are the right technologies available?
- Do people know how to use them?
- Are useful relationships and networks present?
- Is authority located where it is needed?
- Can people exercise the judgment the work requires?

### CAPABILITY

1 2 3 4 5

What most limits what we can do?

### INCLINATION — WILL WE?

A system may be capable of generating new capability and still discourage people from doing so.

Ask:

- Do people believe it is their responsibility to act?
- Are curiosity and initiative welcomed?
- Is intelligent uncertainty legitimate?
- Are people rewarded for helping others become capable?
- Does the culture encourage knowledge sharing?
- Are people willing to challenge assumptions?
- Do consequences reinforce generative behavior—or punish it?

### INCLINATION

1 2 3 4 5

What most affects whether people will act?

### VELOCITY — FAST ENOUGH?

A system can eventually produce the right response and still fail because the environment moves faster.

Ask:

- How quickly do important signals become visible?
- How long does it take to connect the right intelligence?
- How quickly can authority and resources move?
- How quickly can an experiment begin?
- How quickly does feedback arrive?
- How quickly can useful learning travel?
- Can capability develop at least as quickly as circumstances require?

### VELOCITY

1 2 3 4 5

Where does time become the constraint?

## FIND THE GENERATIVE CONSTRAINT

Now bring the assessment together.

Do not ask:

Where did we get the lowest score?

Ask:

What most limits this system's ability to generate the next capability it will need?

The answer may be:

- A weak mechanism.
- A missing connection between mechanisms.
- Insufficient capability.
- Low inclination.
- Inadequate velocity.
- A dependency upon one person or group.
- A structural constraint that affects several mechanisms simultaneously.

Our most important generative constraint is:

We believe this because:

## TEST IT AGAINST A REAL UNFAMILIAR CHALLENGE

Do not leave the assessment abstract. Identify a recent unfamiliar challenge.

The challenge:

_____

Now trace what actually happened.

Did we SENSE it soon enough?

_____

Did we CONNECT the intelligence it required?

_____

Did we MOBILIZE effectively?

_____

Could we EXPERIMENT where the answer was unknown?

_____

Did experience become LEARNING?

_____

Did that learning SPREAD & EVOLVE?

_____

Did we have the CAPABILITY?

_____

Did we have the INCLINATION?

_____

Did we have sufficient VELOCITY?

_____

Now ask:

Does the real experience support the ratings we gave ourselves?

YES / PARTLY / NO

What would we change?

## COMPARE OVER TIME

This assessment becomes more valuable when repeated. Generative capability should not be treated as a fixed organizational trait. The important question is movement. When you return to the assessment, ask:

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

And:

Where does it still depend upon conditions, people, or capabilities that make adaptation unnecessarily difficult?

Record the date:

Assessment 1: _____

Assessment 2: _____

Assessment 3: _____

Look for changes in the pattern—not merely changes in the average.

## DON'T TURN GENERATIVITY INTO A SCORE

You may find it useful to track ratings over time. But resist reducing generative capability to a single number. A composite score can create the appearance of precision while hiding the very thing you need to understand. Two systems with the same average score may have radically different capacities to respond. One may sense and learn exceptionally well but be unable to mobilize. Another may mobilize rapidly but repeatedly fail to learn.

The pattern is critical, but so are the connections, the constraints, and especially the evidence.

## THE GENERATIVE CAPABILITY STATEMENT

Complete the following:

This system is particularly capable of:

Its ability to generate new capability is most constrained by:

The most important condition we could change to increase generative capability is:

We would know that generative capability had increased if:

## THE ULTIMATE TEST

Generative capability is not demonstrated by having good innovation programs, agile teams, knowledge systems, AI tools, learning programs, or collaborative cultures.

Those things may contribute, but they are means, not the test. The test is what the system can do when circumstances demand something it does not already know how to do.

Ask:

When the next consequential need appears—and we do not yet know the answer—how confident are we that this system can recognize it, mobilize around it, discover an effective response, learn from the experience, and cause what it learns to travel and evolve?

Our confidence:

1 2 3 4 5

What is the strongest evidence for that judgment?

What would most increase our confidence?

A generative organization cannot know every capability it will need. Its advantage is different. It is increasingly capable of creating capabilities it could not have specified in advance.

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