Leader Disappearance Test

Companion to Catalyst Leadership | John Coné

The culminating test • What can now happen without you?

You helped the organization confront an unfamiliar problem. You may have changed conditions. People may have developed new capability. Learning may have traveled. Other Catalysts may have emerged.

Two kinds of independence must be distinguished. A system that can repeat familiar work without the leader has developed enduring capability. A system that can recognize an unfamiliar challenge, connect the necessary knowledge, experiment responsibly, learn, and develop a new response without the leader orchestrating every step demonstrates generative capability. This test looks for both, but the second is the more demanding standard.

Now ask one of the most demanding questions in Catalyst Leadership: What can now happen without me that could not happen without me before?

This is not a test of whether the leader matters. It is a test of whether the leader's contribution has increased the capability of the system—or increased its dependence upon the leader.

IMAGINE YOU DISAPPEAR

Not permanently. Imagine simply that you are unavailable.

You are away for three months. You cannot attend the meetings, approve the decisions, answer the questions, or make the connections. You cannot rescue the work when things become difficult.

Now consider the consequential work you have been leading.

The work or system:

_____

What would continue normally without me?

What would slow down?

As you answer, distinguish what the organization can now repeat independently from what it can newly discover and build independently. Which unfamiliar situation could people confront without waiting for you to frame the problem, find the expertise, or authorize every experiment?

What would stop?

What would people wait for me to return to decide?

Those answers reveal dependencies. Some may be appropriate. Some may not be.

THE SIX-MECHANISM DEPENDENCE CHECK

Imagine you are unavailable for three months. Which generative functions would continue without you, and where are you still the indispensable router, decision maker, confidence source, or teacher?

SENSE — Would people still notice change and challenge assumptions?

YES / PARTLY / NO What still depends on me? _____

CONNECT — Would people find expertise and connect across boundaries?

YES / PARTLY / NO What still depends on me? _____

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MOBILIZE — Could people move resources and authority toward emerging needs?

YES / PARTLY / NO What still depends on me? _____

EXPERIMENT / DISCOVER — Could people test assumptions and act responsibly amid uncertainty?

YES / PARTLY / NO What still depends on me? _____

LEARN — Would experience become useful learning without your prompting?

YES / PARTLY / NO What still depends on me? _____

SPREAD & EVOLVE — Would knowledge travel, adapt, and recombine without you?

YES / PARTLY / NO What still depends on me? _____

DON'T ADD THE ANSWERS

This is not a Leader Dependence Score.

Look for the pattern.

Ask:

Where does the system still require me to perform a function it should increasingly be capable of performing itself?

That is your most important dependency.

DISTINGUISH APPROPRIATE FROM UNNECESSARY DEPENDENCE

Not all dependence upon a leader is bad. Some decisions properly belong with you because of legal accountability, fiduciary responsibility, and significant enterprise risk, especially where consequences may require clear individual accountability.

Confidentiality requirements and role-specific authority—for example, strategic choices only you are authorized to make—may also justify some dependencies.

Catalyst Leadership does not mean abandoning leadership responsibility. For each significant dependency, ask: Does this need to depend upon me—or has it simply continued to depend upon me? Focus on dependencies that do not need to remain.

LOOK FOR THE ANSWER DEPENDENCY

Ask:

When the answer isn't obvious, who do people expect to provide it?

_____

If the answer is routinely “me,” ask why.

Is it because:

☐ I have expertise others do not yet possess and cannot readily access.

☐ People lack necessary information.

☐ Authority remains concentrated with me.

☐ People have learned that I prefer to make the decision.

☐ People fear the consequences of being wrong.

☐ I tend to step in before others can discover the answer.

☐ Others have not had enough experience developing judgment.

☐ The system makes it easier to ask me than to find relevant knowledge elsewhere.

☐ Something else:

_____

Then ask:

What would have to change for good answers to emerge without requiring me to supply them?

LOOK FOR THE CONNECTION DEPENDENCY

Leaders frequently become organizational routers.

They know:

- Who to call.
- Where the expertise resides.
- Which relationship matters.
- Who can unblock the problem.
- Where the information is hidden.
- That makes the leader valuable.

It can also make the system fragile.

Ask: What connections currently exist primarily because I personally make them? How could those connections become available without me?

LOOK FOR THE PERMISSION DEPENDENCY

Sometimes people possess the authority to act but still wait.

Ask:

What do people technically have permission to do but psychologically still wait for me to authorize?

Why?

_____

What could I do differently?

_____

LOOK FOR THE CONFIDENCE DEPENDENCY

Sometimes the leader is not providing the answer or the authority.

The leader is providing confidence.

People act only after hearing:

“Yes, I think that's right.”

Ask:

Where am I still functioning as the system's confidence mechanism?

Then ask:

What experience, information, feedback, boundaries, or relationships would allow people to develop confidence in their own judgment?

LOOK FOR THE LEARNING DEPENDENCY

Perhaps the organization acts without you but learns only because you force reflection.

Ask:

If I stopped asking what we learned, would anyone else ask?

YES / PARTLY / NO

Who?

_____

What would make learning a property of the system rather than a habit of the leader?

LOOK FOR NEW DEPENDENCIES

Catalyst Leadership can eliminate one dependency while accidentally creating another.

For example:

- Dependence on the leader becomes dependence on an expert.
- Dependence on headquarters becomes dependence on a local gatekeeper.
- Dependence on one process becomes dependence on another.
- Dependence on human judgment becomes unquestioning dependence on an AI system.
- Dependence on formal hierarchy becomes dependence on an informal network nobody else can access.

Ask:

What dependency did we reduce?

_____

Did we create a new dependency in its place?

_____

Is the new dependency healthier—or merely different?

THE DISAPPEARANCE MAP

Complete the following.

CAN NOW HAPPEN WITHOUT ME

STILL DEPENDS UPON ME—AND SHOULD

STILL DEPENDS UPON ME—BUT SHOULDN'T

I AM NOT YET SURE

The third category—dependencies that remain but should not—is where the developmental opportunity lies.

CHOOSE ONE DEPENDENCY TO REMOVE

Do not try to eliminate every dependency.

Choose one that matters.

The unnecessary dependency:

_____

Why does it exist?

_____

What capability would need to exist for the dependency to disappear?

_____

Who needs that capability?

_____

What condition would need to change?

_____

What experience could help develop it?

_____

What will I stop doing?

_____

What will I do instead?

TEST YOURSELF

Catalyst Leaders can unintentionally preserve dependence because dependence is rewarding.

Being needed can feel like evidence of leadership.

Ask yourself:

- Do I enjoy being the person with the answer?
- Do I step in because I can solve the problem faster?
- Do I confuse being consulted with being valuable?
- Do I create space for others to struggle productively?
- Do I tolerate decisions that differ from the ones I would make?
- Do I give away enough context for others to exercise judgment?
- Have I made my relationships and knowledge accessible?
- Am I building capability—or displaying my own?

The behavior of mine most likely to preserve unnecessary dependence is:

_____

What I will do differently:

_____

RUN THE TEST AGAIN

After an appropriate period, imagine disappearing again.

Ask:

What can now happen without me that could not happen without me the last time I asked?

That is evidence of progress.

But there is an even more demanding test:

What can the system now create without me that it could not create before?

That is evidence of generative progress.

DISAPPEARANCE IS NOT THE GOAL

The goal is not to make the leader irrelevant. As circumstances change, new leadership work will emerge. New risks will appear, new systems will need attention, new conditions may need to be created, or new unfamiliar problems will arise.

The Catalyst Leader moves upstream not to stop leading, but to stop spending leadership capacity on dependencies the system no longer needs.

As one dependency disappears, the leader becomes available for work that only the leader can presently do—and, where possible, can build capability there too.

THE FINAL QUESTION

Traditional leadership often asks:

What did the leader accomplish?

Catalyst Leadership adds:

What did the leader leave behind?

And eventually:

What can now happen without the leader?

But the ultimate test goes further still:

What can this system now create without the leader that it could not create before?

If the answer keeps expanding, leadership has left something more valuable than dependence upon a good leader. It has left behind greater capacity for the organization to create its own future capability. If Catalyst Leadership depends upon the Catalyst Leader, it hasn't yet succeeded.

THE CLOSING STANDARD

The aim is not for the leader to disappear from responsibility. It is for unnecessary dependence to disappear, freeing the leader to address what only leadership can presently do. The strongest evidence of Catalyst Leadership is not simply what continues without the leader, but what new capability the system can generate without the leader.

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