The Catalyst Environment Scan

Executive Guide to Leading Catalysts | Chapter 8

Catalysts do not work in a vacuum. Executives create many of the conditions that determine whether Talent professionals are able—and willing—to work this way.

For each statement, consider two perspectives:

OUR LEADERSHIP TEAM — How often does our leadership team behave this way?

ME — How often do I behave this way?

Don't worry about producing a score. The differences between your answers may be as useful as the answers themselves.

WE INVITE TALENT PROFESSIONALS IN EARLY

1. Talent professionals are involved while important business issues are still being understood—not only after we have decided what we want their department to do.

Our Leadership Team: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___ Don't Know ___

Me: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___

2. The Talent function has enough access to the business to see what is changing, where people are struggling, and where new possibilities may be emerging.

Our Leadership Team: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___ Don't Know ___

Me: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___

3. The Talent function is expected to bring issues and opportunities to our attention rather than wait for us to ask.

Our Leadership Team: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___ Don't Know ___

Me: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___

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WE MAKE IT SAFE TO CHALLENGE US

4. Talent leaders can question how we have framed a problem without being seen as unresponsive or difficult.

Our Leadership Team: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___ Don't Know ___

Me: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___

5. Talent leaders are genuinely encouraged to tell us what it is seeing—even when it conflicts with our assumptions or preferred solution.

Our Leadership Team: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___ Don't Know ___

Me: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___

6. Talent leaders are given enough room to help us understand an issue before we demand a solution.

Our Leadership Team: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___ Don't Know ___

Me: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___

WE VALUE MORE THAN PROGRAM DELIVERY

7. The Talent function is judged by the business difference it helps create—not primarily by programs launched, people served, or work completed.

Our Leadership Team: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___ Don't Know ___

Me: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___

8. We value Talent leaders for making connections, bringing the right people together, and helping useful ideas and learning move quickly across the organization—even when the Talent function does not own the result.

Our Leadership Team: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___ Don't Know ___

Me: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___

9. When the answer is uncertain, the Talent function has room to help us try a small experiment rather than develop a complete solution before we act.

Our Leadership Team: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___ Don't Know ___

Me: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___

WE EXPECT THE BUSINESS TO LEARN

10. Business leaders and managers share responsibility for developing people rather than delegating development to the Talent department.

Our Leadership Team: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___ Don't Know ___

Me: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___

11. We make time to learn from important work—especially experiments, setbacks, surprises, and successes worth repeating.

Our Leadership Team: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___ Don't Know ___

Me: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___

12. When Talent professionals help us solve a problem, we expect the business to become better able to handle something similar the next time.

Our Leadership Team: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___ Don't Know ___

Me: Usually ___ Sometimes ___ Rarely ___

YOUR EXECUTIVE VIEW

Don't add up the answers. Instead, look for three things.

Where are the strongest conditions for Catalyst behavior?

_____

_____

Where are the greatest barriers?

_____

_____

Where are the largest differences between how I rated myself and how I rated our leadership team?

_____

_____

That last question may be particularly revealing.

If you consistently rate yourself higher than the leadership team, you may personally be creating room for Catalyst behavior that disappears when Talent professionals work with other executives.

If you consistently rate the leadership team higher than yourself, there may be something useful—and possibly uncomfortable—to learn from your colleagues.

And if both ratings are low in the same areas, you may have found a place where changing the environment could make a significant difference.

One final question may be the most useful:

What is one thing I could do differently that would make it easier for Talent professionals to behave as Catalysts?

_____

_____

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What Does the Scan Tell You?

The Environment Scan is not primarily an assessment of the Talent function. That is what makes it different from our first tool. The Executive Catalyst Checklist asked you to look at what your Talent professionals are doing. The Ten Questions asked what you could do to invite a different contribution.

The Environment Scan asks whether the leadership environment reinforces or works against that contribution. The Bottom Line that follows asks the other half of the question: if the conditions are improving, do we see the organizational consequences?

That distinction matters. If Talent professionals rarely bring emerging issues to executives, they may need to become more proactive.

Or they may have learned that unsolicited observations are not particularly welcome.

If they rarely challenge a requested solution, they may need stronger consulting skills.

Or they may have learned that once an executive asks for something, the expected response is execution.

If useful learning remains trapped in one part of the organization, Talent professionals may need to become better connectors.

Or leaders may never have made moving that learning a priority.

Usually the answer will not be one or the other. It will be some combination. Catalyst behavior is personal. And environmental. That means executives have more influence over it than they may initially realize.

The Bottom Line

So how would I know that a Catalyst-based Talent function is working? The Scan tells us whether we are creating the conditions. The final test is whether something is becoming different in the organization. I would not begin by counting the Catalysts. I would look at the organization around them.

- Is useful knowledge easier to find?
- Are good ideas, useful learning, and effective practices moving across boundaries—and moving faster?
- Are lessons from experience being preserved and reused?
- Are problems being understood before major solutions are launched?
- Are managers and teams becoming better at building capability through the work itself?
- When circumstances change, is the organization learning and responding faster?
- Is the Talent function able to reserve major efforts for the situations in which its expertise and involvement genuinely add value, rather than having to build and launch a new solution each time the business encounters a capability need?
- And have we created an environment that makes all of those things more likely?

Taken together, those questions lead us to the real test:

Is the organization becoming increasingly able to create, spread, and renew capability—and is useful learning moving through it fast enough to help the business adapt?

That is a demanding standard, but it is also a reasonable business standard. Because the ultimate benefit of a Catalyst Talent function is not a more innovative Talent function. It is not even more Catalysts.

It is an organization that sees sooner, learns faster, adapts more quickly, and becomes capable of doing things it did not know yesterday it would need to do tomorrow. If that is happening, the Talent function is making a contribution that extends far beyond the programs and processes it delivers. And if it happens fast enough, we have begun to build something every executive needs: an organization better able to keep up with change.

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