

Innovator
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Organisational Catalysts:

Understanding and
Nurturing Change
Agents in Your
Organisation

Innovators
Assemble



Susie Braam

Founder of Yellow Cat Innovation and a member of our Innovators Assemble panel, gives a guide to identifying, supporting and maximising the difference-makers in traditional organisations.

Understanding and Nurturing Change Agents in Your Organisation

Over the past three years, I've interviewed more than 40 self-declared organisational catalysts from different companies, industries, and countries. What I discovered challenged many assumptions about innovation, leadership, and what truly motivates people to drive change in established organisations.

This research began with a simple question: if financial rewards don't strongly motivate corporate innovators and change agents, what does? The answer revealed a fascinating group of individuals who are essential to organisational growth yet often misunderstood, underutilised, or inadvertently driven away.

What Is an Organisational Catalyst?

If I had to describe an organisational catalyst in one word, it would be 'different.' They don't conform to the status quo. They ask questions no one else is asking. They see connections and possibilities others miss. These are not the majority of people in our organisations-and heaven help us if they were-but they are very, very special.

The five core qualities of catalysts:

Relentless curiosity

Catalysts ask questions constantly; why, how, and what. Why are we doing this? Why do we do it this way? What's the purpose? Their questions can be hard to answer because often there is no good answer, which can irritate those on the receiving end.

Naturally collaborative

They spark energy from others, invite challenge and seek alternative perspectives. They're excellent connectors with strong networks they actively nurture. They enjoy helping colleagues and, as a result, are often well-respected within organisations.

Visionary thinking

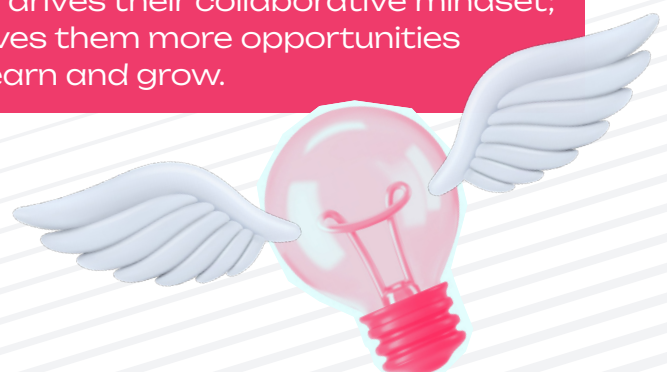
Catalysts are big-picture thinkers who see connections, possibilities and opportunities others don't. They can imagine and re-imagine futures, though some struggle to turn visions into reality without complementary skills around them.

Impact-driven

Every catalyst I spoke to used the word 'impact'; it's their primary motivator. They see how things can be better and want to make them better. Good enough is rarely good enough. They care deeply about their work, their organisations and the impact they have.

Growth mindset

Catalysts want to make things better, including themselves. They're hungry learners, always incorporating new approaches, tools and methods. This drives their collaborative mindset; it gives them more opportunities to learn and grow.



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The Shadow Side:

When Catalyst Traits Become Liabilities

Each catalyst quality can be incredibly powerful when expressed skilfully, but can create challenges when taken to extremes:

- **Curiosity** can become exhausting interrogation
- **Collaboration** can lead to consensus paralysis
- **Vision** can become disconnected dreaming
- **Impact** focus can turn into perfectionism that burns out teams
- **Growth** mindset can manifest as constant direction changes that confuse others

This is why it's crucial to distinguish between **constructive catalysts** and **destructive disruptors**. Destructive disruptors may share some catalyst traits but aren't genuinely curious or caring; they're deliberately challenging in disrespectful ways, seek glory for themselves and avoid accountability.

Why Organisations Need Catalysts

The majority of corporate workers are content to do good work, keep their heads down and deliver on time and budget. But individuals focused on impact over delivery will go the extra mile and create more value for their organisation every time.

Catalysts are the difference and change our organisations and societies need. They don't just accept 'how things are done'; they imagine how things could be done better. In a world of constant change, organisations without catalysts risk stagnation and irrelevance.

How Leaders Can Support Catalysts to Thrive

Supporting catalysts requires a delicate balancing act between some essential elements:

Autonomy and space to explore

Catalysts are highly driven, self-motivated individuals who thrive with a high degree of autonomy. They need you to:

- Trust them and give them space and time to explore
- Avoid artificial constraints or pushing premature execution
- Protect their time so they can focus on change and innovation
- Resist the temptation to 'fake' autonomy when you already know what you want

Creating space means recognising that whenever there's split focus between core business demands and innovation potential, the core always wins out. Where change and innovation becomes a side-of-desk activity, expect slow progress and frustrated catalysts.



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Challenge and Support

The best managers place high trust in catalysts while also challenging them and having their backs. They:

- Push catalysts to think differently and harder
- Ask for evidence and challenge assumptions
- Focus catalyst attention on strategically important problems
- Use their social capital to advocate for the catalyst's work
- Provide cover from politics and pressures from above

Poor managers are duplicitous; saying one thing to the catalyst but another to peers or seniors. They put their own reputation ahead of the catalyst, either shutting them down with unreasonable constraints or sending them off to do unimportant work.

How Catalysts Can Have Their Own Back

Being a catalyst often feels lonely and frustrating. The first words that appeared when I asked a conference audience: "How does it feel being a catalyst?" were "lonely" and "frustrating." Being different in cultures that don't welcome difference is isolating.

Yet catalysts continue because they care deeply. For them, it's almost impossible to walk away from something where they see potential for impact and improvement. This makes them tenacious and loyal, but when taken to extremes, it's detrimental.

Three Essential Actions for Catalyst Self-Care:

Build community

Create connections with other catalysts both inside your organisation and strengthen your external network. The aim isn't an echo chamber, but inspiration and belonging. For me, this was a lifeline. I called it 'filling my cup up'.

Ground expectations and define boundaries

Meet your organisation where it is, not where you want it to be, or you'll be continually disappointed. Know what circumstances will and won't work for you. Set timescales for how long you're prepared to remain in situations with no change.

Ask for specific help

Catalysts tend to take the world on their shoulders. One of my biggest regrets is not asking senior stakeholders for help. In hindsight, several were waiting for me to tell them what I needed them to do. Be specific about what you need from senior leaders.



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The Bottom Line

Balance is everything. The most powerful catalyst qualities become liabilities when taken to extremes. Context is king; what works brilliantly in one situation may backfire in another. Self-awareness is your superpower and considering your impact on others is crucial.

For leaders: It's natural to feel uncomfortable with pressure to innovate and change. You don't need to be innovative yourself. Find the catalysts in your organisation and channel their energy to places of highest impact.

For catalysts: You are different, and that's the point. Don't tone down what makes you special, but learn to express it skilfully. Stay humble, curious, and open - and remember to look after yourself.

Organisations and catalysts who get this balance right create something magical; lasting impact that transforms not just processes and products, but entire cultures and ways of thinking. The investment in understanding and nurturing catalysts isn't just worthwhile; it's essential for any organisation serious about thriving in an uncertain future.

“ **Remember: no one can change everything, but everyone can change something. If you choose to live a life with impact, it's in your control to do so.** ”

Seth Godin

