

The Pastor as a Catalyst

Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations* (New York: Portfolio, 2006), 120-131.

The Catalyst

It was in thinking about David Martin that it dawned on us: all of the catalysts we spoke to draw upon similar tools. And while no one can wake up one day and decide to become Auren Hoffman, we can certainly incorporate the tools of his trade.

Genuine Interest in Others

To a catalyst, people are like walking novels. Information that most of us barely listen to is pure gold to someone like Auren. To understand this, think of the most boring person you've ever met. At a party, for example, someone might drone on about their days at this company or that one, and most people would nod their heads, put on a fake smile, and think about what they ate for dinner three nights ago. In all likelihood, whether consciously or unconsciously, the speaker picks up on this lack of interest and either tries to find another topic or turns silent. This is the cause of awkwardness in casual social situations. We talk to people we don't really know about stuff we don't really care about, and it creates a sense of unease.

But chances are, if you talked to Auren, you wouldn't be able to have a boring conversation if you tried. That's because Auren is genuinely interested in others. In fact, Auren believes that if you find someone boring, it's only because you, the listener, haven't asked the right questions or found that person's true passions.

We can tell when someone like Auren really cares about what we're talking about; when that happens, we tend to open up and reveal more about ourselves. The conversation naturally becomes more interesting, and we feel he has really been able to "get" us. It is at that point, when we feel understood, that we are most open to something new. We become willing to change.

This is the catalyst's essential tool. If you met Auren at a party and he called you a week later to introduce you to one of his friends, you'd be more likely to take his call and follow through than you would be if the call came from someone with whom you'd had a boring, artificial conversation.

Loose Connections

Most of us have interesting personal conversations with a select group of our closest friends. But a catalyst is able to have these kinds of interactions with thousands—in fact, they thrive on meeting new people every day.

It's impossible for someone like Jimmy Wales to have a deep relationship with each and every Wikipedia user he meets; there aren't enough hours in the day. For most of us, these casual

interactions would get tiresome very quickly, and we'd yearn to spend time with our old friends. But because they are genuinely interested in others, catalysts find these kinds of relationships incredibly meaningful.

That's not to say that a catalyst can't have close personal friends. It's just that in addition to close friends, catalysts have a host of acquaintances. Knowing so many people allows a catalyst to make connections between individuals who would otherwise never meet.

Mapping

While you're talking to Auren at a party, he won't just be intrigued by your stories; he'll also be mapping out how you fit into his social network. Catalysts think of who they know, who those people know, how they all relate to one another, and how they fit into a huge mental map. Catalysts don't just know more people; they also spend time thinking about how each person fits within their network.

Desire to Help

Wanting to help is the fuel that drives a catalyst's ability to connect people. If Josh Sage didn't want to help people, he wouldn't bother traveling around the country getting them engaged in social activism. Likewise, without the desire to help, Auren Hoffman would just enjoy meeting new people and forming acquaintance-type relationships. It's only because he wants to help that he actually connects people to one another.

Passion

Once Josh Sage puts his mind to something, chances are that it will get done; he locks on a target and doesn't waver. His relentless belief in his ideology, as well as boundless energy to pursue a goal, drives Josh and makes him effective.

Meeting People Where They Are

A catalyst doesn't try to persuade people but rather relies on a much more subtle technique: meeting people where they are. Psychologist Carl Rogers warned that aggressive advice-giving often has the opposite effect, causing people to shut down rather than change. Instead, catalysts listen, acknowledge experiences, and allow individuals to arrive at their own solutions.

Emotional Intelligence

A catalyst depends heavily on emotional intelligence. All the catalysts we've met are intellectually brilliant, but they tend to lead with emotion. Emotional connections come first; only then do they engage in brainstorming and strategy.

Trust

It's not enough to meet people where they are and form emotional bonds; a catalyst must also trust the network. With a flattened hierarchy, outcomes are unpredictable, and direct control is impossible. Instead, personal relationships based on trust become the foundation.

Inspiration

A true catalyst isn't just a matchmaker but also an inspiration to others to work toward a goal that often doesn't involve personal gain. They encourage people to believe in a bigger vision, as seen in the early days of Wikipedia, where contributors worked toward the dream of creating a freely available global encyclopedia.

Tolerance for Ambiguity

Catalysts often answer, "I don't know," because decentralized organizations are fluid, unpredictable, and constantly evolving. The ambiguity may seem overwhelming to outsiders, but for a catalyst, it creates space for innovation and creativity.

Hands-Off Approach

Perhaps the most difficult and counterintuitive element of being a catalyst is getting out of the way. A command-and-control leader closely tracks what everyone is doing, but a catalyst fosters innovation by allowing members of a decentralized organization to take charge.

Receding

After mapping a network, making connections, building trust, and inspiring people to act, what does a catalyst do? They leave. If they were to stay, they might stifle the decentralized organization's growth. Auren Hoffman steps out of the way so that the people he connects can move their relationships forward independently.

The Catalyst Versus the CEO

While both are leader types, catalysts and CEOs rely on very different tools. A CEO is the boss, leading through hierarchy and structure, while a catalyst leads as a peer, relying on trust and inspiration. CEOs seek order, predictability, and profit maximization, while catalysts thrive on ambiguity and are usually mission-driven.

However, catalysts can be invaluable even within structured organizations when innovation, expansion, or engagement is needed. They disrupt stagnant systems and introduce fresh thinking. Deborah Alvarez-Rodriguez transformed Goodwill by introducing decentralized brainstorming teams, increasing both employee engagement and profits.

Catalysts are best suited for situations requiring radical change and creativity. While they may introduce some chaos, they also bring innovation and energy. Let them dream, and they will thrive.