Three questions that will change you, your team and your organisation

Q1 Think of a time when you had an idea about work. …A good idea.

You could have thought of it whilst at work or at any other place or time. An idea that was worth sharing AND YOU DID NOT SHARE IT. Has that happened to you? Has it happened more than once? This situation is the same as being in a meeting, having a constructive comment to make, and remaining silent.

This situation happens to many people and much too often. There are many reasons from both the individual perspective - are you more introvert than extrovert - and from the situational perspective - what was the situation and who else was there?

I have asked this same question in many workshops, forums and presentations, and usually the participants eyes drop to look at the floor.

From an organisational perspective, this is very poor engagement and ultimately leads to poor performance. Simply put, the organisation is hiring the best people it can but isn’t taking advantage of their maximum possible contribution.

The sharing of ideas requires two people; the idea generator and the first listener. This article is all about being the very best ‘first listener’ or, as we call them the ‘catalyst’.

In chemistry, a catalyst is a compound that accelerates a reaction and is not consumed by the reaction, such that the catalyst can be effective over and over again.

In the high performing organisations that I have had the opportunity to work with, there are many people who voluntarily or by delegation take the role of the catalyst. There are benefits for the organisation to have catalysts spread throughout, and there are also benefits for the individuals who volunteer or are selected to become catalysts.

Q2 Please think about your ‘best day at work’.

When you were fully engaged, you knew what was expected, you had the resources and materials to do great work and the activity was directly linked to your organisation’s strategy, goals and important outcomes. Those days are the reason you go to work every day. Those are the days that leaders need to
create for their teams to deliver outstanding results, improvement with high staff engagement. Those are the days that create great organisations.

By definition, innovation is dealing with ambiguity, multiple uncertainties and the need to balance many stakeholders, executive expectations and ‘politics’. My expectation was that innovators would be experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety and pressure.

To my surprise, whether successful or not, many innovators reported they experienced their ‘best days at work’ while working on an innovation project. Many people reported that after a short break or recovery, they would be keen to do it again. And when returning to their normal day jobs, innovators were energized to do better routine work.

Innovation team members reported that whilst on the activity, they felt their opinion counted, everyone on the team was committed to doing quality work, and they were regularly spoken to about the team and their individual progress. These ‘best days at work’ also included team members knowing what was expected, had resources and materials, and the activity was directly linked to organisation goals.

So, consider your ‘best day at work’. Did it involve innovation, change or a new challenge? From my research, great days at work involve innovation and engagement of staff. Innovation outcomes and engagement are linked.

Q3 Think about a time a work when you were recognised for your contribution.

Being recognised with a simple certificate, a ceremony and the congratulations from people you respect is satisfying and empowering to do more great work. Your work and the work of your team are what you are paid to do. Doing something differently, doing it better, faster or cheaper are continuous improvement that should be recognised as over and above business as usual.

Many organisations have annual award programs and monthly performance awards and even employee of the week nomination walls.

Does recognition work for you? Did you have a time when you were recognised and it inspired you to do more great work? The obvious benefits of recognition are for the recipient. The subtle benefits are for the audience, proud to see their workmate or peer being recognised and also to inspire them to do more great work and be recognised themselves. Another benefit is that recognition gives leaders the opportunity to be seen in a very positive situation, with their staff, on the factory floor giving positive praise.

I like recognition as each occasion holds a case study, a good story for the organisation. An opportunity for sharing that will last much longer then the activity or ceremony. Case studies can form a valuable database. An innovation recognition database becomes a valuable resource to identify who the innovators are, where they work and who were the catalysts involved.

The Catalyst

The most powerful and unique factor I uncovered when studying innovation was the use of outside help. Some teams called them connections, some called them sponsors. I settled on the term ‘catalyst’.

In innovative organisations, a catalyst accelerates the progress of a team or an individual innovator without being consumed or owning the idea or project.

In your ‘best day at work’, did you have someone who helped your progress, someone outside your team or direct boss? Did you have a catalyst to help you?
A catalyst is someone that cares about you and your work, who encourages your development. A catalyst can be thought of as a best ‘idea’ friend at work! The catalysts help your idea succeed.

Now think about your future at work. Are you an innovator? Are you a catalyst? Are you a team leader? Are you an observer of the innovation process? For each of you, would it be a good idea to know who the catalysts are? How to be a better catalyst? How to develop catalysts?

At Hargraves, our attention moved from looking at just innovators to look at the catalyst. Identifying, developing and operationalizing a catalyst network within an organisation can deliver both innovation and engagement. Deliver both the ‘are we doing the right thing’ projects and the ‘are we doing things right’ day to day. Catalyst networks have been proven to deliver consistent and real added value whereas waiting for the inspired innovator or next big thing leads to inconsistent results.

**Like spectators at a sporting event**

One interesting side benefit of this approach is how a small group of innovators and catalysts can have a dramatic effect on the total organisation’s engagement and performance. Many people, for their own reasons, do not feel comfortable being an innovator or a catalyst. They are like spectators at a sporting event. The players are the innovators, the supporting staff are the catalysts; coaches, medical assistants etc. and these large number of people are the spectators in the grand stand.

Spectators celebrate the success of their team. Spectators are involved in every activity of their team – without leaving their seats. Spectators are energized and empowered by their team’s success. The use of recognition and awards empowers the innovators, the catalysts and the spectators.

The benefit of understanding the innovators, catalysts and spectator analogy to your organisation is that by being or influencing the catalysts you can create change across a large number of people. Our research shows that one catalyst for every 50 staff is sufficient to create sustaining and significant change.

Roger Corbett, former CEO of the major retailer Woolworths in Australia said, ‘if you are not innovating, support someone who is.’

**Benefits of the catalyst approach**

For the first time an organisation, a team or an individual can start the process of managing innovation in a systematic way. Hargraves has been working with exemplar organisations for more than 7 years and have traced results in some for over six years, year by year. The results can be outstanding.

Has your organisation undertaken a change program that has lasted over five years and has delivered increased performance every year?

The ‘catalyst approach’ combined with recognition, provides a new and proven approach to managing innovation for productivity, engagement, change and growth in all organisations; large and small; for profit, government or not for profit.

**How does an individual catalyst assist the idea generator?**

A catalyst is the first point of connection for any person with an idea in your organisation. A catalyst has the talent, mindset, training and experience to identify and support good ideas or recognise and stop poor ideas while still positively motivating the idea generator.

Catalysts have a privileged position as they are trusted collaborators for idea generators. Some would say they are the ‘ideas best friend’.

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For innovation initiatives, in formal systems catalysts play the critical role of keeping the initiative alive. In informal systems, catalysts become selected by idea generators through word of mouth and positive support from the past.

A catalyst’s role is that of friend, coach, mentor, supporter, knowledge expert, organisation expert and all round positive person. A catalyst usually does not nominate themselves, the idea generators nominate or find them.

When you have a problem at work, and need help outside your direct boss and team mates, who do you ask? When someone prompts a solution to your issue by saying, ‘you should talk to XYZ about that problem’; the person suggested is usually a catalyst. Catalysts identify themselves through previous experiences.

**Once an idea generator identifies a catalyst, the catalyst undertakes 3 steps.**

**Step 1 : SEE.** Seek to understand the situation etc. gain clarification and insight about the problem, the idea and the idea generator themselves.

**Step 2 : THINK.** The catalyst, using their own creativity and thought, develops suggestions about how they can progress the idea or stop the idea without stopping future idea generation.

**Step 3 : DO.** Working with the idea generator, the catalyst makes introductions, finds new information and gives insight to the idea generator.

**How many catalysts dramatically improve the success of their organisation?**

The actions of the catalyst with the idea generator focus on the idea itself. Is it a good idea? How do you know if it is a good idea or not? How do you make the idea better? How to support the idea and get other additional support for the idea?

**In large organisations, there are many catalysts and when collaborative organisations develop catalysts they also get their supply chain partners or stakeholders involved.**

If one catalyst can support a number of idea generators over time, then a network of catalysts means that the acceleration and implementation of good ideas increases dramatically. No one catalyst can be connected to everyone and be able to help every idea. On average, in high performing organisations, a catalyst would be connected to about six other catalysts. There are many benefits of being part of a catalyst network as well as many benefits for an organisation to be able to ‘see’ the network and leverage their active catalysts.

**What next?**

Last century, Steve Jobs revitalised an ailing Apple Corp with the words ‘think different’ to become the most valuable company in the world. This century, the world is a very different place and we must revitalise ourselves with the theme ‘work different’. What made us successful last century may not appear to be working now. We have to approach our work differently.

This century, technology is no longer an advantage as everyone has access to the same technology and the same information through the internet. The difference comes back to people. The full engagement of the very best staff that an organisation can acquire and retain is vital for long term success. The understanding and utilization of catalysts is one approach that is proving successful in many organisations across many sectors.

**ACT NOW: Ask how the Catalyst Program can change your organisation call Allan Ryan directly on 0418614243 or Email: allanr@hargraves.com.au**

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