

# The StraightTalk Coach

## Insights for Leading From Strength

### Thought Catalysts: Prima Donnas or Prime Movers?

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**A**re you a creative thinker who advocates unique solutions to every problem?

Do you thrive on competitive brainstorming?

Are you frequently frustrated by others' resistance to your ideas?

Do you excel at clarifying strategic options?

Is being distinctive one of your most prized attributes?

Have you found it difficult to fit the mold at most places you have worked?

If you answered Yes to at least four of these questions, you are probably a Thought Catalyst who could fuel innovation, learning and change to transform your organization. Yet it is likely neither you nor your organization is taking full advantage of your potential.

#### Prime Movers vs. Prima Donnas

Thought Catalysts are broad and deep thinkers who stimulate new perspectives and creative solutions, and strive to achieve unparalleled recognition by applying their ideas for strategic

impact. By accelerating learning and change, Thought Catalysts can be prime movers who drive innovation that makes a difference in today's global marketplace. They thrive on challenge, excel at identifying fundamental causes and are unmatched at brainstorming novel solutions.

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**Life does not consist mainly  
± or even largely ± of facts  
and happenings. It consists  
mainly of the storm of  
thoughts that is forever  
blowing through one's head.**  
~ Mark Twain

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Thought Catalysts can also be prima donnas who so prize being unique that they make little effort to fit in. Their enjoyment of competitive brainstorming can be abrasive. No issue is too minor to capture a Thought Catalyst's interest and energy. Their appetite for new ideas may overshadow the details and effort required to implement changes that achieve or sustain results. Thought Catalysts tend to dominate discussions, force their agendas on others and ignore the need for collaboration.

This dichotomy between Thought Catalysts' potential to be prime movers and their tendency to be prima donnas not only thwarts their effectiveness, it also prevents leaders from leveraging Thought Catalysts' contributions for maximum advantage.

Individual Thought Catalysts and organizations share responsibility for this situation. Yet there are a number of approaches Thought Catalysts can take to greatly improve their impact ± and satisfaction.

#### 1. Develop an Area of Expertise

Thought Catalysts are often intrigued by so many things that they try to participate in ± and dominate ± projects across the entire organization. However, Thought Catalysts are most effective when they anchor their efforts in a subject in which they have attained functional excellence.

To develop functional excellence, try choosing an area about which you are passionate and then stay focused on problems or opportunities within it. Just be careful not to select too wide an area of expertise or apply it too broadly.

#### 2. Focus on Significant Problems or Opportunities

Thought Catalysts' inc l i a n i o t a

constantly change their organizations in bold ways disturbs those who prefer incremental change. You will be much more successful when applying your talents to major opportunities or problems in which the recommended disruptions are commensurate with the need and/or potential gain.

In addition, Thought Catalysts are often so eager to contribute that they insert themselves into even minor projects. Stop wasting political capital on inconsequential issues. Look for situations within your area of expertise in which your powerful idea-generating abilities can advance the organization considerably.

### 3. Find the Right Culture

Thought Catalysts thrive in risk-taking organizations where there is a greater appetite for the innovation, new ideas and change at which they excel. Conversely, conservative organizations often find Thought Catalysts too challenging.

Carefully evaluating cultural fit is a critical success factor for Thought Catalysts. It is also a major pitfall because Thought Catalysts may see conservative organizations as offering excellent opportunities to achieve recognition.

Resist this temptation. You will indeed be recognized as distinctive, yet the gap between your style and the organization's will not likely be bridged. The result is much more likely to be resistance and frustration than triumph.

### 4. Choose the Right Boss

Thought Catalysts do best when their superiors understand what they can contribute, assign them to significant projects and provide occasional <sup>TM</sup> cover for challenges to the status quo.

Look for a boss who is both willing and able to provide this support. Also look for someone you want to support ± a superior you want to meet halfway and whom you will be careful not to burn out by constantly requiring protection on unimportant matters.

### 5. Commit to Collaboration

No matter how much they enjoy being

unique, Thought Catalysts cannot be prime movers without understanding and conforming to an organization's cultural norms ± which includes collaborating effectively with all key stakeholders.

Lack of collaboration is a fundamental reason Thought Catalysts fail. In fact, they tend to push so many ideas so energetically that others get irritated and tune out. Deciding to collaborate is one simple yet transformational way to improve your impact. If you are not sure how to collaborate effectively, ask for guidance and follow it.

For more insight into balancing the need to stand out and the need to fit in, we highly recommend *Fit In, Stand Out: Mastering the FISO Factor for Success in Business and Life* by Blythe McGarvie.

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<sup>TM</sup>An invasion of armies can be resisted, but not an idea whose time has come.

~ Victor Hugo

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### 6. Create a Test Lab

A <sup>TM</sup> kitchen cabinet is indispensable to helping Thought Catalysts test and refine ideas. Build yours carefully, choosing people who stimulate creative thinking and provide reality checks on new concepts without automatically rejecting them.

Avoid inviting anyone over whom you have position power: they may confuse discussion with direction and race off to implement unformed ideas or support questionable concepts to garner favor.

### 7. Intervene at the Right Time

Thought Catalysts so enjoy problem-solving that they try to participate in or lead every step of the process. This is often perceived as grandstanding or domination. It is also risky, because such behavior can actually derail good solutions.

Accept the fact that your strengths are most valuable in the early stages of the problem-solving cycle ± identifying underlying causes, brainstorming ideas and

selecting solutions. Also accept that others are better at keeping the analysis inclusive and fact-based, determining criteria against which to measure solutions and designing and coordinating implementation.

Do what you do best, then get out of the way.

### Organizations and Thought Catalysts

Most organizations include Thought Catalysts who could fuel innovation and growth, yet fail to leverage their potential. Each of the ways in which Thought Catalysts can improve their own impact and satisfaction also has an organizational component.

For example, instead of dismissing Thought Catalysts as difficult, help them identify an area of expertise and assign them to major opportunities or problems. Try to match Thought Catalysts with superiors who understand their potential and can provide guidance and protection. Encourage Thought Catalysts to collaborate and provide resources to help them do so more effectively. And so on.

If your organization is risk averse, think carefully before hiring Thought Catalysts; the mismatch will likely be too great.

Most Thought Catalysts aspire to be prime movers but often behave or are perceived as prima donnas. Much of the disparity is based on misunderstanding about what Thought Catalysts can contribute, the situations in which they thrive, and the structures and support required to leverage their creativity, deep thinking and innovation potential. Much of this can be resolved if Thought Catalysts and their organizations recognize the opportunity and work together to capitalize on it.

Are Thought Catalysts prime movers or prima donnas? Are they an annoyance or a valuable resource? Just as an irritant seeded in the right environment can produce a priceless pearl, Thought Catalysts have potential to fuel innovation, learning and transformation. <sup>HK</sup>

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