

# Beware of the catalyst

by Gianni Anchois

**The indication of a job well done  
equals your destruction.**

Have you ever been offered a job where you would have “been the catalyst” for something (growth, change, sales acceleration, you pick)?

## **POINTLESS**

It seems that broad job descriptions are becoming the norm, especially in large or very large companies. In the old days, it was pretty easy to understand, at least at high level, what your job would be by just looking at the job title.

Stuff like “project manager” or “marketing lead” or even “technical supervisor”. Sharp, straightforward, clear. Nowadays, not only do we get fancy job titles, but job descriptions become weirder too, often with little reference to the “real” duties.

The latest I heard of these crazy things goes something like this: “You will be acting as the catalyst in a value chain of functions, who will neither

report hierarchically nor functionally to you but who will depend on your role to make things seamlessly work”.

### **A QUESTION OF SEMANTICS?**

Now, apart from the obvious nonsense of being responsible for driving the behaviour of people who could not care less about you (and be sure: they don't!), who in their sane minds would ever like to be a catalyst? And even worse, who the hell established that a catalyst is a good business metaphor to be used?

Let's start with the definition:

***“Catalysis is the change in rate of a chemical reaction due to the participation of a substance called a catalyst”.***

So the catalyst does participate in a chemical reaction, either to accelerate it or — surprise surprise — to slow it down. It does that by interacting with the substances that are brought together to form a chemical reaction. So in theory, going back to our business metaphor, a catalyst could add some value to the chemical reaction itself by just being an external factor. But it might as well just slow everything down — kind of worrying don't you think?

Even more interesting, the definition continues as such:

***“Although catalysts are not consumed by the reaction itself, they may be inhibited, deactivated, or destroyed by secondary processes”.***

That's also quite intriguing. What this means is that even if you do a good job, the best you can hope for is to survive the reaction, or if your luck runs out you might dissolve or evaporate. Not that exciting for your career development...

Finally, and this is a killer in my view:

***“A catalyst works by providing an alternative reaction pathway to the reaction product”.***

Basically, it means that the reaction would happen anyway, even without the intervention of a catalyst, by just leaving things to themselves. Which

is to say that a catalyst without a chemical reaction ready to happen is pretty much useless.

## **MEANINGLESS**

So let's look back at the business metaphor, shall we?

If you have identified the need for a certain process or set of processes to happen across a value chain to which multiple functions contribute and are involved with, why the heck don't you:

1. make clear to the contributing parties that until they bring the right components the "chemical reaction" won't happen, or
2. empower a controlling external agent to make sure each party does behave as expected.

Bringing in a simple catalyst, that might or might not accelerate things, is not going to guarantee better performance or even a general improvement of things.

On the contrary, the most probable effect is for the catalyst to become extremely frustrated: after all, when there is a lack of components to the solution ready to be "catalysed", the catalyst has pretty much nothing to do. Or it potentially might get destroyed after the reaction has happened.

Quite an appealing job proposition: an indication of a job well done equals your destruction. Did you say you wanted to be a catalyst?

*Source of definitions: Wikipedia.*

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