

THE CATA LIST TAKING EFFECTIVE ACTION

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What distinguishes the mediocre leader with so-so results from the effective leader who makes a big impact every time? The answer is the ability to take effective action.

There's a big difference between taking action and taking *effective* action. Most leaders are fairly good at taking action. They make lists and check items off those lists everyday. To be truly effective, you've got to be more strategic about the items that go on that list. Instead of just putting down every small action that will move you to your vision step by step, you've got to choose one or two high-impact actions that launch you forward in leaps and bounds. This approach helps you turn motion to momentum.

To illustrate this, we can think of a concept from chemistry: the catalyst. In the sciences, a catalyst is a substance that increases the rate of a chemical reaction without being consumed in the process. For you, a catalyst is an action that dramatically increases the rate at which you achieve your vision, without consuming *you*. The goal for leaders who want to be their most effective and get the best possible results is to look for the catalysts in their action plans – those powerful actions that have the ability to initiate powerful, even transformational results.

You can get the potency of a catalyst by using an action plan appropriately called the CATA List. The CATA List is a chart divided into four categories:

1. Catalysts
2. Achievements
3. Tasks
4. Avoidances

These categories help you sort interminable lists of "To-Dos" to find the ones that pack the biggest punch. Then you trim away the rest.

Catalysts

To find your catalysts, ask yourself, "What is the one thing you could do that would have the greatest impact on your vision?"

Any item you call a "catalyst" must be an action that drives all the rest, either because it causes the rest of the actions to happen; it frees you to put your time where you want it; or it unlocks a barrier to action. The main criterion for your catalyst is that you know this one piece will do more than any other to advance you in the direction of your vision. If you're writing a speech, a catalyst might be to stand up and practice. If you're leading a company, a catalyst

might be to communicate the strategic direction. If you're trying to lose fifty pounds, a catalyst might be to go running or give up sugar. Looking at these examples, you can see how easily catalysts get crowded out by more pressing issues. Indeed, even though your catalysts have the most value, if you're not careful they can easily get pushed aside.

To find your catalysts, think about what action you would take if you could find uninterrupted quality time because you know it would make the biggest difference in your ability to attain your vision.

Achievements

The next category includes actions you classify as important...*really* important. They may not have the transformational effect of your catalysts, but they are the kinds of achievements that matter on a day-to-day basis. These achievements typically take center stage in your life. They tend to be:

- daily actions
- key relationships
- priority projects
- deadlines

As a rule, working on achievements makes for a very productive day.

Tasks

You use the "tasks" category for the actions you'd like to take but can't justify as truly critical. Yes, they are things that may have to get done, but they don't have nearly the impact as your catalysts and achievements.

Tasks are big time consumers such as long meetings, some networking, Or obsessive perfecting of non-essential details. You might feel a little twinge when you admit these tasks are less-than-important, because you may want to do them. And you may get to. But only after the more valuable things are done.

Avoidances

Many leaders find the "avoidances" category the hardest to fill. The items in this category take more energy than they deserve. When you're trying to rid your action plan of excess, cut the fat by forcing yourself to put at least 25 percent of your "To-Dos" onto this list. To find actions to avoid, look for the ones that take a lot of time with little return. The "avoidances" list is a place to throw off extra baggage. Letting some actions go undone allows you to be lighter, more nimble and available for the things that really matter.

As a whole, the CATA List takes the commitments that emerge from your focus areas and marries them in a single-page, concrete list of actions that ultimately lead to your vision for living and leading well.

The CATA List in Action

Let's look at an example of how the CATA List works.

Richard was the CEO of a commercial real estate company. His work style was fairly typical. He kept a running list of things to do on notepad and prioritized them periodically to figure out where to spend his time. Nothing appeared to be wrong with this approach until the real estate industry was slammed by the turn in the economy. Richard noticed that doing the same old things in the same old way wasn't working anymore. He was busy, but he wasn't getting anywhere.

Richard finally had to ask himself, "What is the single most important action I could be taking right now – the one thing that if I did it, would make the biggest impact?" The answer for Richard was to throw out the old strategic plan and build a new one from scratch – a strategic plan that was commensurate with the long term vision for the company but also took into account the new realities of the market. He had found his Catalyst.

With this new focus, Richard was able to make a new To Do list of actions that would support this new strategic plan. Some of the actions, like building client relationships and maintaining key projects, were aligned to the strategic plan. Other actions, like supporting his management team on an ongoing basis and maintaining certifications, were also important actions he put on his Actions list.

Like any leader, Richard had a number of tasks he had to complete on a regular basis. Budgeting. Staffing concerns. Paperwork. In the context of his new strategic plan, however, some of the activities that had taken most of Richard's time in the past suddenly took on less importance. He could see, compared to his catalyst, which activities were truly impactful and which were simply Tasks he needed to complete as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Finally, Richard had a new appreciation for what he had to avoid. There was no room for risk-taking in the new strategy, which was all about sustainability and stabilization. Richard took a good hard look at the activities he'd been spending time on that no longer made sense in the current reality. He put them on the list as Avoidances and taught himself to refocus on the things that mattered now.

Richard's process of creating a CATA List illustrates the main point of creating this kind of an action plan: it shifts your thinking. By understanding what the most important actions are that will help you achieve your vision, you are able to discern what's slightly less important, probably not that important, or not important at all. Then you can focus your attention where it really matters.

When you create a CATA List, you have a quick categorization of everything you need to do, organized in order of value. As you think about all the actions on your “To- Do” list now, can you see how categorizing your tasks in order of value might help you make room for working on your goals? Suddenly the most important thing you need to do isn’t just the most pressing; it’s the one that fits with your focus and leads to your vision.



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