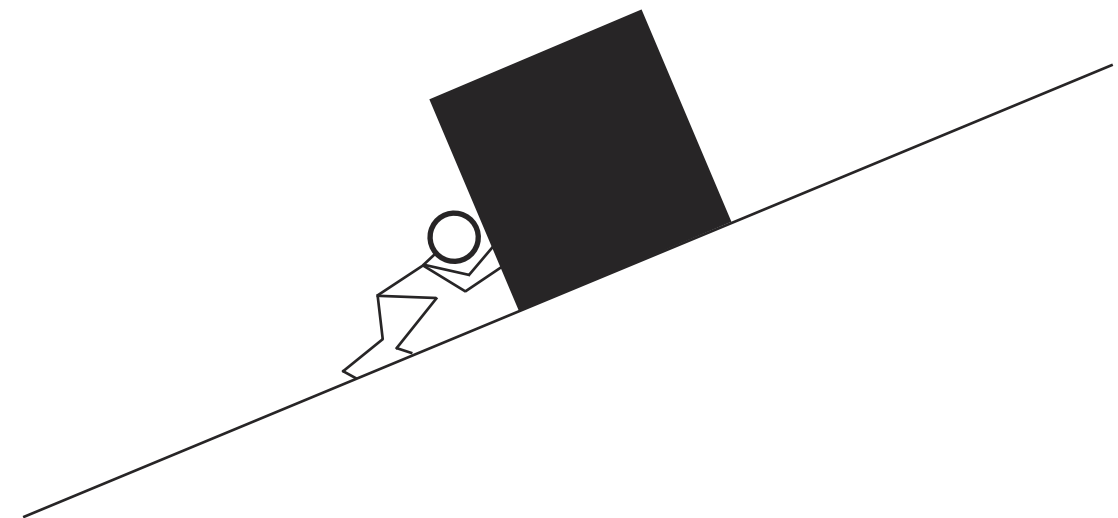


# BUILDING PEAK PERFORMING CULTURES & ECO-SYSTEMS OF INNOVATION

## A DIFFERENT WAY OF WORKING, LEADING & MEETING

It's time to interrupt the out-dated push-push-push model of organisational life that confuses busyness with productivity, pits our health against our performance, and stifles our creativity at every turn. These ways of working are no longer good enough, especially if we want to innovate our way to more meaningful, creative and sustainable futures – let alone break through and solve some of the super-wicked problems of our time.

Dr Nick Udall, CEO nowhere



In today's crazy, uncertain and unpredictable world we quickly need to move beyond these outdated ways of working, leading and meeting – *for there couldn't be a more important time to lean forward and accelerate the rate of change, innovation and transformation.* This is definitely not the moment to lean back and entrench.

Yet, we still hear from our clients that their organisations...

- are **time poor** – where busyness has become a badge of honour
- are stuck in endless, unproductive and **dysfunctional meetings**
- only have **one speed** – fast and now!
- are places where it is **unsafe to speak up** and say what you really think
- are **overly fixated on making people accountable** (code for 'I need to know who to blame')
- are held back by the painful **power plays** of siloes and fiefdoms
- rely on **hierarchical, command & control** cultures that disempower and de-skill
- tolerate their people doing just enough – inadvertently incentivising **mediocrity**

- use out-dated **performance management** policies and processes
- have **senior teams** whose impact and coherence are way less than the sum of their parts
- avoid **difficult conversations**
- are suffering increasing levels of **stress and mental illness**
- feel overwhelmed by obsessive **stakeholder management**
- have **disengaged populations** who can't see the purposeful light at the end of the tunnel anymore
- promise **transformations** that are more rhetoric than reality

The truth is that these are all symptoms of cultures that are getting in their own way, rather than ones that are able to leap forward and shape and make new futures with courage, confidence and skill.

Unfortunately, too many organisations try (with all good intent) to fix these symptoms one at a time, rather than address their root cause (and the one thing that would unlock them all) – the human operating system itself, their culture.



A few of the many things organisations do in the name of culture change include:

- **Putting their most senior leaders through the latest leadership development fads** which are generally full of good theories, case studies and personal development activities (like connecting to your personal purpose) but that don't actually shift day-to-day practice, let alone culture.
- **Assigning their senior leaders a coach.** Great for supporting leaders and their growth but again doesn't shift culture.
- **Increasing their social media presence** with soundbite leadership – unconsciously reinforcing the 'I' rather than the 'we'.
- **Executive team development** because culture comes from the top – but building a team and shifting a culture are completely different things. Granted if done well the former is an outcome of the latter, but not the other way around.
- **Driving culture change through a Project Management Office** that focuses on the management of activity as opposed to knowing what really shifts a human system – so it just gets busy putting more 'stuff' into the system.
- **Putting too much focus on data** and analytics – fretting about and reacting to small and likely meaningless fluctuations in engagement scores rather than getting stuck into really helping employees increase their creativity and productivity in their day-to-day work.

It's not that any of these are all bad – they're not. It's just that lots of disconnected, piecemeal activities don't, in any way, equal cultural transformation. This is the real reason why the failure rate is so high.

So, in a world where the need for change, innovation and transformation couldn't be more acute, knowing how to choreograph transformation and tune a culture has become perhaps the most pressing leadership challenge of our time.

#### Tuning culture

What we have come to realise, from over 30 years of working with leaders and organisations, is that tuning peak-performing cultures is a systemic intervention and a phased journey that needs to work at both

macro and micro levels ie. with macro-frameworks that bind us, guide us, challenge, support and elevate us; and micro-skills and ways of working that transform the way we turn up, think, relate, lead, meet, organise and communicate. Shifting the micro at scale is the only way of breaking free of our everyday habitual grooves and paths of least resistance.

Together these macro-frameworks and micro-skills allow us to shape, make and lead cultures that are purpose-driven, time-rich, multi-speed, psychologically safe, highly adaptive, innovative and peak-performing.

These cultures are also hugely efficient because they focus resource and energy on insight-driven action, rather than action for action's sake. And, they are deeply passionate, enlivening and enriching places to work – with well-being an inherent and natural outcome, and not just an aim.

These cultures are the holy grail because they enable us to take our productivity, innovation and performance to wholly new levels, in sustainable and deeply human ways.

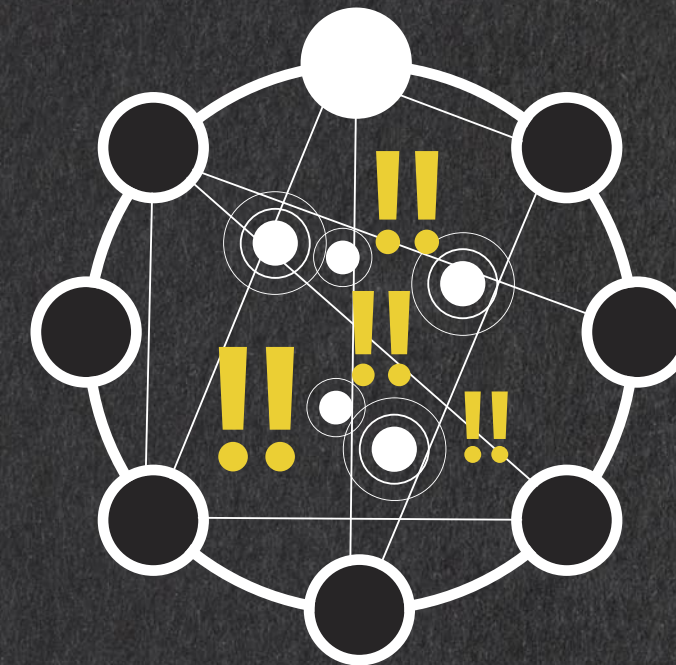
#### Taking it one step further

These cultures are also the pre-requisite for building 'eco-systems' of innovation – a new organising form that we believe will become the innovation powerhouse of the future.

These intriguing organisational forms are the opposite of monocultures, formed instead from multiple organisations, each with their own distinct purpose, vision, values, strategies and cultures.

Eco-systems of innovation develop an embodied understanding that:

- **the whole (the pattern)** is greater than, and significantly different from, the sum of its parts
- **continuous feedback mechanisms** are the key to being able to adapt and evolve at speed – and do ground-breaking work
- **only a small number of simple rules** are needed to create highly-g geared, super-efficient and scalable self-organising forms
- **by attending to the subtle human dimensions** of change, innovation and transformation you can really tap into the collective genius of your people.



#### The Secret Source for building cultures and eco-systems of innovation



However, the magic ingredient that is frequently missed, is 'difference'; for difference is the fuel that unlocks our creativity and our capacity to innovate – as you can only change your mind if you constantly challenge your mind in multiple directions.

Cultures and eco-systems of innovation know how to see, value and move towards difference, and then put those differences into creative relationship. This generates an exponential number of new and novel intersections, and spaces in between, massively increasing the potential for breakthrough thinking and action.

They also know how to hold the creative tension needed for new patterns of collective thought and action to emerge; increasing their ability to move like a synchronised flock of birds, working with shared intention and coherent action.

Ultimately, their creative power lies in their capacity to ask and hold the big questions, fail fast to learn fast, catch the fleeting and fragile moments that matter, and create teams, and communities of teams, that deliver outcomes and impact that are way greater than the sum of their parts.

#### These cultures have to be led-in

These peak-performing cultures and eco-systems of innovation can only be called forward and led-in by evocative leaders and creative teams who have learned how to:

- **create and hold spaces** in which groups come together and surprise themselves with what they can achieve
- **step into the unknown** (where different rules apply) and hold the creative tension of not-knowing long enough for new patterns of thought and action to emerge
- **tap into the collective intelligence** of groups by maximising the number of creative, multi-directional connections between people
- **lean into and work with complexity** to harness the greater number of intersections it offers to create different and innovative pathways forward
- **focus on the simple things that make the difference**, like how we turn up, relate, think, lead, meet and organise

- **tune into the subtle and sublime moments** of insight, breakthrough, peak-performance and flow that open us, connect us, shift us and move us
- **do this regularly and collectively** – at will and with skill – and in a way that is deeply fulfilling and highly infectious
- **walk in the world in a creative and generous way** and help others do the same

This is a special kind of leadership – and is very different to hero leadership, where leaders put themselves at the centre, and feel the need to know and control everything.

Fortunately, the skills, qualities and capacities for being evocative and catalytic can be learned and developed at scale – enabling not just a few leaders to be elevated, but entire populations.

This is the essence of the Catalytic Practice, a different way that:

- **accelerates the rate of change, innovation and transformation** in a team, a community, an organisation and even an ecology of organisations
- **catalyses moments of breakthrough by design**, helping groups make discontinuous leaps forward
- **transforms meeting cultures** – the simplest and most profound way of unlocking new levels of productivity, creativity and organisational energy
- **teaches us how to have and hold breakthrough conversations** – the simplicity of slowing down, tuning in and thinking together in ways that allow the new to come to mind
- **uses the power of peak experiences to transform us and shift our mindsets** – enabling us to see things that we were previously unable to see
- **encourages the best of us to turn up every day** – our imagination, our creativity, our ingenuity, our entrepreneurial energy, our determination and perseverance
- **builds deeply human and nourishing cultures** – that are time rich, purpose-driven and peak-performing

#### The time is now

We are certainly not short of a multitude of deeply systemic and complex problems to solve – whether that's climate change, food security, the energy transition, the global pandemic, health and mental wellbeing, inequality, discrimination ... or just the need to get better at catalysing change, innovation and transformation within our own spheres of influence.

There is no time to waste. If you are not making your culture, your mindset and your ways of working one of your top priorities, then you are already being left behind.

And, if you are not seeing it and working with it as a layered choreography that is both transforming the way your people work, lead and meet every day on real-work at scale, AND catalysing breakthrough performance born from unlocking the creative power of teams and communities of teams (ie. creating the double loop of demonstrable impact) ... then you are probably falling into several of traps outlined above – and most likely the one where you put all of your focus on developing the 'individual' as a way of shifting your culture.

It just doesn't work like that!

It's time to move into a different era – expanding beyond coaching, facilitation and leadership development – and into the Age of Catalysis.

We need leaders, more than ever, to become catalysts of social chemistry, leaders who pay attention to the small and subtle things that increase the potency of human interactions, enhance the creative possibility of any given moment and raise the energetic frequency of their teams, communities and organisations – for this is the only way to develop the escape velocity needed to break-free, breakthrough and surprise ourselves with what is possible everyday.

And we need these leaders now, now, now.

This is the first in a trilogy of Catalyst articles by Dr Nick Udall.

#### About Dr Nick Udall

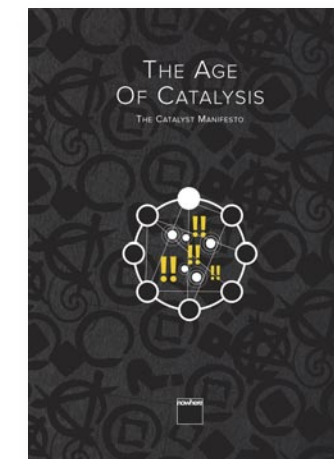
Dr Nick Udall is a co-founder and the CEO of **nowhere**, a keynote speaker, and a co-founder and former Chair of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on New Models of Leadership.

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#### About nowhere

**nowhere** was founded in the mid-nineties as a living experiment in consciousness, creativity and commerciality. It works behind the scenes and at the highest levels with large complex organisations helping them break through some of their most intractable issues and challenges, develop breakthrough strategies and innovations, build purpose-driven cultures and eco-systems of innovation, and design and choreograph transformation journeys.

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[It doesn't need to be like this anymore. There is a different way. Get The Catalyst Manifesto.](#)