

Catalyst Programme, Unilever UK, 1999-2007

Alastair Creamer, Founder and Director, Catalyst

Unilever is one of the largest advertisers in the world. As a global storyteller, it relies heavily on the flow of creativity. In the early 2000s, Unilever launched a new strategy called Enterprise Culture, and Catalyst became the UK's signature programme in response.

Three business objectives:

1. Unilever was looking to drive performance. There was evidence of a lack of creative confidence, with a heavy reliance on external agencies. Catalyst was tasked with developing the creative skills of internal brand leaders and their teams.
2. Two UK businesses – Lever Brothers and Elida Fabergé – merged and Catalyst became a major programme in the development of a third culture based upon creativity.
3. Unilever wanted to connect more closely with their consumers. Catalyst's contribution was to transform a predominantly inwardly-looking culture into a more externally focused, outlook-looking one drawing on ideas and inspiration from many sources.

How it worked:

Catalyst was based and originated within Unilever's HR Department. We had full-time presence in the corporate HQ, accessible and open to everyone. Critically, it had top-down support and responded to business issues as identified by brand and functional teams.

We began with badly-needed creative skills workshops: writing better concepts and briefs; crafting better brand stories; holding braver conversations; Live & Direct (giving **and** receiving feedback). We delivered these workshops using novelists and poets, narrative theory experts, theatre practitioners, photographers, playwrights and more.

The programme continued to expand successfully, and we broadened it to include wider cultural change such as: 1) Winning mindsets 2) Listening skills 3) External mentoring schemes 4) Changing the working environment 5) Artists in residence.

The results:

The Catalyst programme was an amazing success, running for 8 years with the unwavering support of 3 different chairmen at Unilever. Data from internal surveys revealed it was constantly recognised as the most innovative personal development programme being offered by the company.

The next stage:

Eventually we worked with the Unilever Board developing techniques for living the values alongside traditional leadership development programmes. We brought in leading cultural organisations such as the **National and Royal Court Theatres, Hayward Gallery, Serious Productions (jazz producers), London College of Fashion and Tate Modern.**

The programme received significant media attention (**Financial Times, The Guardian, BBC Radio**) and won an **Arts & Business Award**.

“Catalyst is the most strategic, daring, long-term example of arts in business I have come across in my research.”

Lotte Darso, Research Manager,
The Creative Alliance, Learning Lab,
Denmark

“Catalyst is an approach that the competition couldn't even imagine. It is game-changing.”

Oliver Lloyd, Brand Manager,
Unilever, 2005

“Catalyst is one of the things I think is really fantastic about Unilever. It means inspiration from unexpected quarters being put to incredible use to deliver real results.”

Adrian Greystoke,
Unilever employee, 2001

