

## NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

### GLOBAL LEADERSHIP: WORKING ACROSS BORDERS

**Nano Tools for Leaders®** are fast, effective leadership tools that you can learn and start using in less than 15 minutes — with the potential to significantly impact your success as a leader and the engagement and productivity of the people you lead.

**Contributor:** Mario Moussa, Learning Director of Wharton's [Strategic Persuasion Workshop](#), and co-author (with G. Richard Shell) of *The Art of Woo: Using Strategic Persuasion to Sell Your Ideas* (Portfolio/Penguin, 2007).

#### THE GOAL:

Enhance your effectiveness in working across global borders.

#### NANO TOOL:

As companies extend their global reach, managers must stretch their abilities to communicate and collaborate across borders. Both the stakes and the failure rate are high: research shows that over 40 of executives who were previously successful in their home countries have trouble adapting in unfamiliar cultural settings. The basic difficulty lies in a lack of mental agility. Those who succeed are open to learning new ways of communicating, navigating social encounters, and building relationships.

Applying his research on communication in complex social settings, Dr. Moussa has created a process for developing a “global mindset.” The process starts with a fundamental question: “What kind of border is most important in my situation?” A common mistake is to assume that cultural borders matter most. But often it is other “borders” that present tougher challenges — conflicting corporate agendas, divergent functional backgrounds, clashing psychological styles, and other differences lurk beneath situations at work. For example, conflicts between an American CFO and her Chinese marketing colleague might have less to do with their cultural backgrounds than with their misaligned functional orientations. By enhancing your awareness of different borders and taking active steps to cross them, you will become a more effective leader.

#### HOW COMPANIES USE IT:

- **Crossing the cultural border.** When Yang Yuanqing became the CEO of Lenovo in 2005, he recognized that his limited knowledge of Western customs presented a significant barrier to his effectiveness. Not only did he hire a tutor to improve his English, but he became a round-the-clock viewer of CNN. In less than a year, he succeeded in crossing a daunting cultural border. He achieved both linguistic and social fluency and became adept at managing relationships with Western colleagues, shareholders, and politicians.
- **Crossing the functional border.** Fortune singled out Susan Lyne as one of the most powerful women in business. The chairwoman of Gilt Groupe, a leading e-commerce site, has made a career of crossing functional borders, moving from magazine editing to television programming to online retailing. Lyne’s intellectual curiosity and psychological flexibility enabled her to keep moving up as massive technological shifts reshaped the global business environment. One secret to her success — she asks questions about unfamiliar functional details, looking for those “catch phrases” that help build credibility.



- **Crossing the psychological border.** Tim Cook stepped into the top job at Apple when Steve Jobs passed away in late 2011. As COO, Cook had already demonstrated his ability to manage operations across the globe. In his new role, he had to cross the psychological “border.” Cook remembers a piece of practical advice that Jobs offered in one of their final conversations: never ask what he (Jobs) would do, but “just do what’s right.” Much more reserved than the mercurial Jobs, Cook had to establish his own distinctive authority as CEO, remaining true to his distinctive personality and values. To succeed at the psychological border, you have to be flexible, but you also have to know your own mind.
- **Crossing the political border.** The HP board turned to Meg Whitman when German CEO Leo Apotheker exited the company after a series of communication snafus. In addition to bringing greater discipline to executing strategy, Whitman began applying her considerable skills at the political “border,” aligning a fractious board behind a clear direction, building trust with skeptical investors, and calming the nerves of anxious employees. Her effectiveness as a communicator depends on avoiding bland generalities and taking time to craft messages about the right specifics for each audience.

## **ACTION STEPS:**

The following steps will help you determine which type of strategic partnership will help you best meet your needs and deal with current levels of uncertainty as they impact returns on the business.

1. Identify the most important border you need to cross in your current situation: cultural, functional, psychological, or political (in the sense of corporate agendas). Use the following questions to determine the border at which you are standing:
  - Do you wonder whether to shake hands or bow, dive into business or start with a personal conversation, or how to handle similar issues related to social norms? If so, you are at the cultural border, and should do some research on local customs.
  - Does your lack of technical knowledge keep you from participating in important meetings? If so, you need help crossing the functional border. In this case, learn enough about a field to be credible when discussing it.
  - Do your colleagues have very different personality styles from yours? If so, you need to pay attention to the psychological border. Introverts may need to amp up their energy, while extroverts must often take it down a few notches.
  - Are opposing corporate agendas causing conflict? If so, you have some work to do at the political border. Put on your negotiator’s hat and look for creative solutions that balance outcomes and relationships.
2. Once you have identified the critical border, target the adaptation or focus you need in your behavior or communication style. Depending on your situation, you may need to be talkative or act in a more subdued way, focus on what you know best or learn a new field, speak your mind or build coalitions behind the scenes. It can be useful to rely on a mentor or other resources, such as 360 feedback, to help you see your blind spots and plan your learning agenda.
3. Take small, observable steps, with the goal of achieving a sense of being in tune with your social surroundings. As the great English novelist E.M. Forster said, “Always connect.”
4. Assess your effectiveness and make changes where needed. Ask yourself, as Jeffrey Immelt does, “What are three things I did yesterday that I could have done better?”

## SHARE YOUR BEST PRACTICES:

Do you have a best practice for entering strategic partnerships? <http://whartonleadership.wordpress.com/>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- *Managing Across Borders: The Transnational Solution*. Christopher A. Bartlett and Sumantra Ghosal (Harvard Business Review Press, 2002). Studies companies that provide their leaders with the resources required to succeed in global settings.
- *From Global to Metanational: How Companies Win in the Knowledge Economy*. Yves Doz, Jose Santos, Peter Williamson (Harvard Business Review Press, 2001). Describes strategies adapted to global markets based on examples from 36 companies.
- "Making It Overseas," Mansour Javidan, Mary Teagarden, and David Bowen, *Harvard Business Review*, April 2010. A discussion of the three kinds of "capital" — social, psychological, and intellectual — that successful global leaders draw upon.
- "[What Do Good Global Leaders Do?](#)" Tobias Fredberg and Flemming Norrgren, HBR Blog Network. A set of leadership principles, drawn from a survey of highly successful global CEOs, for working across borders.
- Dissertation research on global leadership conducted by University of Pennsylvania graduate student and former global executive J.P. Gagnon. An ongoing study of the sources of effectiveness in global leadership.
- Mario Moussa serves as Learning Director of and teaches in [Strategic Persuasion Workshop: The Art and Science of Selling Ideas](#). He also teaches in [Global Strategic Leadership](#).

## ABOUT NANO TOOLS:

Nano Tools for Leaders® was conceived and developed by Deb Giffen, MCC, Director of Innovative Learning Solutions at Wharton Executive Education. It is jointly sponsored by Wharton Executive Education and Wharton's Center for Leadership and Change Management, Wharton Professor of Management Michael Useem, Director. Nano Tools Academic Director, Professor Adam Grant.