

## NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

# PROFITING FROM DIVERSITY: LEADING PURPOSELY “MISMATCHED” TEAMS TO SUCCESS

**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:** Alan S. Berson, educator, leadership and communications consultant, executive coach, and primary author of *Leadership Conversations: Challenging High-Potential Managers to Become Great Leaders*.

### THE GOAL:

Harness the value of diverse perspectives on your team to achieve more profitable outcomes.

### NANO TOOL:

Numerous studies have shown that diverse teams outperform more homogenous ones. They tend to be more innovative, they make better decisions, and they add more to their organization's bottom line. For leaders, though, diversity (or divergent thoughts) can be a challenge, especially for those who are set in their ways or under time pressures. It can lead to conflict that results in the silencing of the very viewpoints that are a strength of diverse teams. Instead, practice the five Action Steps below to better manage and lead teams to profit from their diversity.

### ACTION STEPS:

- 1. Include everyone in the conversation.** Each person on your team, or who is invited to your meetings, should know that their voice will be heard. When you overlook people or exclude them from conversations, they tend to draw their own conclusions (usually the most negative ones possible). This negativity destroys relationships, reduces information flow, and decreases productivity. So make it a point to ask each person for their input.
- 2. Adopt an open appearance.** Accept the definition of 'open' as being willing to change your mind. Since 60 to 90 percent of communication is non-verbal, any lack of openness is broadcast in your face and voice. What attitude does your body language convey to people who have differing viewpoints and opinions? Negative body language makes people feel devalued and eventually makes them stop giving you new ideas or suggestions that could enhance innovation or improve decisions. Crossing your arms, looking at the ground or your watch, or giving an obviously fake smile indicate that you're not interested. Positive body language includes leaning in to conversations, making eye contact, and nodding or smiling.
- 3. Ask open-ended questions.** The job of a leader is to ask questions. Specifically, asking “where, when, and what else?” questions will go a long way in making people feel respected and heard. They also help you understand someone's position or idea that doesn't initially make sense to you. In addition, you give the other person an opportunity to think more deeply and potentially discover something they had not thought of. Allow deep thinkers and introverts the time and space to formulate responses and ideas — it is usually worth the wait.



4. **Think “yes-and.”** To what extent do you tend to weigh two alternatives or consider the conflicting ideas of two people by declaring a winner (and therefore also a loser)? Instead of using either-or thinking, challenge yourself to find ways to embrace both ideas. Most possibilities are points on a continuum rather than polarities. Ask, “How can we combine these two perspectives, or build on them both, to come up with something even better?” Also avoid praise using the word: ‘but’ because doing so negates the positives in the first half of the sentence; instead discuss how the team is doing a great job and how they can even be more effective.
5. **Use conflict constructively.** Differences in strategy and tactics don’t have to be an excuse to argue, and ignoring those differences tends to deepen conflicts. Instead, during your next meeting, purposefully use constructive conflict to explore controversial ideas and bring out new points of view. List the pros and cons of each approach and use them to have the warring parties identify a new goal — an option that contains even more pros and fewer cons than either of their original ideas. If the conflict is personal, address it personally and privately; in most cases such conflicts can be solved through conversations that eliminate negative, incorrect assumptions that get in the way of collaboration at work. Remember, the higher up you are in an organization, the more you are assessed on internal actions exhibiting diversity and cooperation instead of competition; use conflict as a way to forge cooperation, improve teamwork, and you might even increase your own promotion potential.

## HOW LEADERS CAN USE IT:

- High-value sales forces at Dell, Medtronic, and Bristol-Meyers Squibb have integrated diversity concepts by holding quarterly “career conversations” in which regional and district sales managers get to fully understand the unique qualities of each sales professional and mentor them on reaching their career goals. These conversations simultaneously uncover how important each sales professional can be to the organization and shows them how valued they and their diverse input are in creating organizational success. The conversations build a stronger rapport between the managers and the sales professionals, which in turn increases job satisfaction and retention for both.
- A leader at NASA was accused of harassment because he was harsh and non-communicative with people who didn’t agree with him; his actions felt capricious and threatening. He started asking people why they did what they did in a way that showed he was open to listening and cared about their answers. He not only learned how to incorporate the ideas of others into his decisions and lower organizational stress, but also salvaged his own career.
- At Lexis/Nexis, the IT group was in the midst of a major project that was going poorly. The person in charge thought all was going well because everyone had stopped bringing ideas to him. The lack of input was really due to the belief that the project leader would not listen, and that ultimately the initiative would fail. He was persuaded to ask why others were not talking to him and to listen openly to their concerns. The feedback was personally shattering, but he rallied, and incorporated the views of the rest of the team into what became a successful new roll-out of their new system architecture.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- *Leadership Conversations: Challenging High-Potential Managers to Become Great Leaders*, Alan S. Berson and Richard G. Stieglitz (Jossey-Bass, 2013). Details the leadership/management mindsets and the four types of conversations leaders at every level must master, including those that build relationships, develop others, make decisions, and take action.
- “Reversing the Extraverted Leadership Advantage: The Role of Employee Proactivity,” Grant, A.M., Gino, F., and Hofmann, D.A. *Academy of Management Journal*, 2011, 54(3), 528-550. Discusses how leadership is impacted when leaders are introverts or extraverts.

- *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose it, Why People Demand It* (2nd ed.), Kouzes, J.M. and Posner, B.Z. (Jossey-Bass, 2011). Emphasizes the importance of holding conversations throughout the organization to develop a corporate culture and ethics that can be widely embraced.

## **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 is Professor John Paul MacDuffie, Professor of Management at the Wharton School and Director of the Program on Vehicle and Mobility Innovation (PVMI) at Wharton's Mack Institute for Innovation Management.