

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

WHAT'S YOUR LEADERSHIP QUESTION?

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.

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THE GOAL:

Make your mark as a leader by identifying what you really want to accomplish and believe matters. Then keep it front and center, and stay focused on reaching your ideal outcome.

NANO TOOL:

“The most common source of mistakes in management decisions is the emphasis on finding the right answer rather than the right question. The most serious mistakes are not being made as result of wrong answers. The truly dangerous thinking is asking the wrong questions.” —Peter Drucker

No matter their role, their organization, or their industry, all leaders have something in common: overwhelming demands on their time. There is simply too much to do. How can you stay focused on and achieve what is most important (and know what to say “no” to)? Crafting your own leadership question can help you stay on track. Why a question? Our brains are hardwired to seek answers, which help guide where we place our attention and what we ignore.

If we don't phrase them for ourselves, we run the risk of answering the wrong questions. And because as leaders our questions guide the behavior of others, it's even more important that we identify a key question for ourselves.

Your question will be highly personalized—two people in the same role at the same company can have very different questions. Your ideal question will relate to who you are as a leader and on *how* you see your role and its potential for meaning or impact. Use the action steps below create a question that guides your future actions and decisions towards a legacy that you'll be proud to own.

ACTION STEPS:

Use the following prompts to help you consider how you currently spend your time and energy. The key to identifying your leadership question is understanding what is truly important—and what isn't. For example, if your key objective is to revolutionize your industry, although you may want to be financially efficient, that may not be part of your leadership question. Your Leadership Question will focus on what you most want to achieve, not simply on the conditions required for success. Begin by answering these four questions:

- What are you most passionate about at work?
- What excites and energizes you at work?
- What achievements do you tend to remember most?
- What provides you with a sense of significance and legacy?



Then, bring in more detail by considering:

- What actions or outcomes you are ok not achieving?
- What are the key overarching problems you are trying to solve?
- What problems that you solve provide the greatest contribution to your organization and its stakeholders?

Looking over the above observations, what are the themes that underlie everything you view as important? What are you yearning to accomplish? Translate those themes into a leadership question that encompasses them. Once you have crafted your Leadership Question, use it to screen each new option or opportunity and reduce or eliminate behaviors and activities that don't help provide answers to your question.

HOW LEADERS USE IT:

- For cosmetics icon Estée Lauder, the question wasn't "How can we sell more product?" She was guided instead by "How can we help women feel more beautiful?" This question guided her to disrupt the industry, ignore her advisors, and spend most of her marketing budget by offering a "free gift with purchase," creating luxurious packaging, and selling in department stores with knowledgeable sales people. Her Leadership Question guided her every step of the way, including where to place mirrors and lighting to provide the most flattering angles, making sure women felt good about themselves versus feeling intimidated.
- For Starbucks' CEO Howard Schultz, the groundbreaking question wasn't "How do we convince people to buy expensive coffee?" Intrigued by the Italian coffee bar culture, he sought to create community and companionship in his shops, providing an experience that would help educate consumers and provide them with the highest quality coffee. His question was "How do we educate the American public about good coffee?"
- Under the leadership of Steve Jobs, Apple created products that were as much works of art as technology. He sold us products we didn't know we wanted, and made even those who hated or feared technology fall in love with them. He was obsessed with the details of new products and refused to release them until he was fully satisfied. How did he know what to focus on and when to deem a new product ready for market? Jobs always asked, "Have we taken responsibility for the complete consumer experience?" His Leadership Question was very clear on the big picture, and guided him and his organization to then focus on the details of each product that would not only make a great difference but also create an all-around exceptional experience for the user.
- See the Additional Resources below for more examples and research findings.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- "Being a Strategic Leader is About Asking the Right Questions," Lisa Lai (*Harvard Business Review*, January 2017). Offers five questions to use with your team to drive clarity, alignment, and strategic insight.
- *A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas*, Warren Berger (Bloomsbury USA, 2016). Provides a framework for problem solving that helps develop questions that challenge authority; disrupt established structures, processes, and systems; and force people to consider alternatives.
- *Think Like a Freak: The Authors of Freakonomics Offer to Retrain Your Brain*, Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner (William Morrow Paperbacks, 2015). Introduces a blueprint for solving problems and how to thinking more productively, more creatively, and more rationally.

ABOUT NANOTOOLS:

Nano Tools for Leaders® was conceived and developed by Deb Giffen, MCC, director of Custom Programs at Wharton Executive Education. Nano Tools for Leaders® is a collaboration between joint sponsors Wharton Executive Education and Wharton's Center for Leadership and Change Management. This collaboration is led by Professors Michael Useem and John Paul MacDuffie.