

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

ENHANCE DECISION MAKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING BY WALKING

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.

Contributors: Thierry Malleret, PhD, Co-Founder and Managing Partner, *The Monthly Barometer*, and **Christopher Maxwell, PhD**, Senior Fellow, Wharton Center for Leadership and Change Management..

THE GOAL:

Enhance creative decision making and solve problems while walking.

NANO TOOL:

Leading decision makers are increasingly recognizing that not only are walking and working compatible, but that walking actually improves business outcomes. The CEOs of LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook are following in the footsteps of Aristotle, Freud, Truman, Darwin, and Beethoven — all of whom took extended walks during their work days. Frédéric Gros, professor of philosophy at the Institute of Political Studies, Paris, notes in his book *A Philosophy of Walking*, “It was not just that walking was a distraction from their work. It was that walking was really their element. It was the condition of their work.”

The benefits of walking meetings, walking breaks, and even short walks around the office or on a treadmill include sharpening the mind, dispelling doubt and procrastination, releasing beneficial endorphins, and encouraging inspiration and creativity. Beyond the ample evidence of these physical and mental benefits, recent research now demonstrates that walking physically alters the brain, improving its plasticity and promoting the creation of more brain cells. Epidemiological studies conclude that walking protects the brain from cognitive impairment. These findings endorse what Nietzsche asserted over a century ago: “All truly great thoughts are conceived by walking.”

ACTION STEPS:

To use walking to improve business outcomes, including coming up with more and better ideas and enhancing decision making and problem solving, consider the following five options.

- 1. Walk in the city:** For those who live and work in cities, there are many attractive and easily accessible places to walk (think New York City’s High Line or Philadelphia’s Schuylkill Banks urban trail). Facebook’s new Menlo Park, California HQ includes a roof-top walking trail and over 400 trees. Public parks and walking paths are widely available in urban areas.
- 2. Walk in nature:** Marc Berman, a psychology professor at the University of Chicago, reports that walking in nature can improve “directed attention” — a foundational mental resource that allows us to manage the focus and direction of our thoughts as well as regulate our emotions and behavior.



- 3. Walk in the forest:** *Shinrin-yoku* (translated as “forest bathing” or “taking in the forest atmosphere”) has now become a government-endorsed policy in Japan. Several medical experiments conclude that the practice lowers blood pressure and the level of cortisol, a stress hormone.
- 4. Walk to be more creative:** Stanford University researchers Marily Oppezzo and Daniel Schwartz found that when people were walking on a treadmill or outdoors they were 60 percent more creative than when seated. David Strayer, a University of Utah cognitive psychologist, found that backpackers scored 50 percent better on a creativity test during a wilderness trip compared to their performance before the trip started.
- 5. Walk to enhance decision making:** One of the authors of this piece (T.M.) frequently takes *Monthly Barometer* clients, senior business leaders, and policy makers into the mountains surrounding Chamonix, France to help frame an issue and clarify decisions while walking. The second author (C.M.) has taken over 200 business students and corporate executives on remote treks around the world during which small walking teams brainstormed solutions to challenges faced by local nonprofits.

HOW LEADERS USE IT:

- Klaus Schwab, founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, instituted the practice of walking when a complicated decision had to be made. He would take a colleague, a few employees, or even an entire team to the hills surrounding Geneva to ponder a particular problem or solve a sensitive issue. When the issue was particularly thorny, the stroll could extend to climbing a 3,000 meter peak in the Alps.
- Adair Turner, former chairman of the UK Financial Services Authority, reports, “Walking clears my mind and clarifies my thoughts; ideas fall into new patterns; articles and lectures take better shape.” Walking helps us organize the world around us: choose a path, and our brain surveys the environment from which we construct a mental map that we then translate into a series of footsteps. Likewise, the process of deciding instructs the brain to review its own mental landscape before plotting a course through it.
- A brain rendered more receptive and elastic by walking is better prepared to navigate the present and cultivate the future. Nicolas Bertrand, CEO of French video game retailer Micromania, says “Walking liberates first my body and then my mind.”
- Ravi Chaudhry, a former Tata senior executive, affirms, “When I walk, I’m not in a hurry.” Behind this aphorism lies an important truth. Many top decision makers confess that they are rushed into complex decisions without being given a chance to reflect. Walking, because it allows one to reclaim possession of time and to reflect unencumbered, is the perfect antidote to “brainless thinking.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- Malleret, T., & Malleret, M.A. (2017) *Ten Good Reasons to Go for a Walk*. Foreword by Klaus Schwab. Kindle Edition. Offers well-researched arguments that convey the message that walking can dramatically improve physical and mental health while also having the potential to make our world a better place.
- Maxwell, C. (2016) *Lead Like a Guide: How World-Class Mountain Guides Inspire Us to Be Better Leaders*. Praeger (Santa Barbara, CA.). Describes research findings that reveal key strengths of mountaineering guides and their application to business environments.
- Williams, F. (2017) *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative*. Norton (New York, N.Y.). Demonstrates that our connection to nature is much more important to our cognition than we think and that even small amounts of exposure to the living world can improve our creativity and enhance our mood.

CITED IN THIS NANO TOOL:

“Can a Simple Walk Improve Your Creative Thinking?” Thomas Ward Ph.D., *Psychology Today*, Mar. 8, 2017.

“Give Your Ideas Some Legs: The Positive Effect of Walking on Creative Thinking.” Oppezzo, M. & Schwartz, D.L. *Journal of Experimental Psychology* (2014) 40 (4).

“Exercise Training Increases Size of Hippocampus and Improves Memory,” Erickson, K.I., Voss, M.W., Prakash, R.S., et al. *PNAS* (2011) 108 (7).

ABOUT NANO TOOLS:

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.