

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

HIPO LEADERSHIP SKILLS, PART 2: BUILD YOUR MENTAL CAPACITY

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: Ram Charan, advisor to many of the world's top CEOs and corporate boards, and author of the best-seller *Execution* and 25 other books)

THE GOAL:

Develop a set of habits that will help you advance your thinking, judgment, and imagination.

NANO TOOL:

We all know that mental capacity can grow in a nanosecond if there's a will, discipline, and time devoted to practice. Recall a time when a question or comment you heard made you say, "Wow, that really opened my eyes," or "Now I get it." You shouldn't leave these moments, and the important insights they generate, to chance. With practice, you can build your mental capacity just as athletes build their physical capacity. Practicing the following skills will set the stage for important gains in your thinking, judgment, and imagination.

ACTION STEPS:

- 1. Widen your lens.** The more broadly you see the world, the bolder your vision is likely to be. A wide lens fires up the imagination and helps you define a bigger opportunity. Seeing the big picture is important in both startups and existing businesses. You can widen your lens by reading and visualizing things on your own, or by interacting with other people. In both cases, diversity is key. Take a cue from Hollywood movie producer Brian Grazer, who gets great ideas by having "curiosity conversations" with people from many walks of life, from athletes and fashion designers to theoretical physicists.
- 2. Keep learning.** All your forward momentum depends on the things you learn and how well you learn them. Have the humility to realize that there is always something more to know, and that many other people know more than you do. Think of learning broadly, so you're not just accumulating factual information but also deriving insights and meaning from it. Learn about your business, about yourself — your behaviors, how your mind works, what you're good at — and about other people. That means taking in a lot of information, and also reflecting on it. Scheduling regular time each week to write your new insights in a journal is a good way to consolidate your learning. That regular practice will take you to a different place.



- 3. Build diverse networks.** Networks are becoming increasingly important to everyday work, and research has shown that networking is related not only to concurrent salary and career satisfaction, but to salary growth over time.¹ There are many ways to build them inside and outside your company, and many ways to benefit from them. Whenever you meet interesting new people, or participate in projects that involve more than one department or business function, be sure to continue those relationships by staying in touch long after those encounters or projects end. You should also reach out to people in other parts of your company if only to learn what they do and how they see the business.
- 4. Seek information from everywhere.** Information stimulates learning and diversity of information stimulates creativity. **Read** to be aware of geo-political, economic, and technological changes. Soon you will be able to recognize trends, discern which ones could endure, and make decisions accordingly. Devote a specific time to reading every day for half an hour — it is a habit that will bring more value to you and your leadership than any other investment of your time. Keep up with the headlines and dig deeper on what interests you, but keep your lens broad. Things that may not seem relevant to your work today may spark a great insight later. Take time to **arrange conversations** to see what others are picking up. Short, targeted conversations with a wide range of people, especially those you don't know well, can broaden your knowledge. Think of four or five people who might have interesting knowledge, insights, or personal connections. If you don't know them, who could introduce you? Once the conversation is arranged, think of what you want to contribute, and have a list of three or four key questions you want to ask.

HOW LEADERS USE IT:

Aaron Levie was 20 when he and some friends from high school decided to build a company that would help users share files and collaborate via the cloud. They solicited seed money for Box from famed investor Mark Cuban by cold-calling him via email. To their surprise, he funded them. They moved to Palo Alto to keep working on their project, getting more venture capital and scaling up from seven people to around 25. Ten years later, Box had \$303 million in sales for fiscal year 2016, but to Levie that was just the start. Because he was a big-picture thinker, Levie could see the pieces coming together to create a \$40 billion market for the kind of service his company provides. “We think there is a tremendous amount of upside,” he told *Fortune* in March that year.

Thirty-something Kiran Kumar Grandhi was a leader at India's GMR Group when he was put in charge of building an airport — something that neither he nor his company had done before. He set out to learn everything he could as fast as possible. He persuaded Malaysia Airports Holdings Berhad, which operated 39 airports in Malaysia, to partner with GMR for a small financial stake and made the most of their expertise. He also attended conferences, studied reports, and went behind the scenes at 35 airports around the world. “I spent real quality time in those airports, learning from the operations people and top-level executives,” Grandhi said. He turned weekly staff meetings into learning events by devoting part of the time to discussing how other airport companies dealt with retailers, fueling, or cargo. Learning and execution went hand-in-hand and the first airport project was a success, followed by many others.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- ***The High-Potential Leader: How to Grow Fast, Take on New Responsibilities, and Make an Impact***, Ram Charan with Geri Willigan (Wiley, 2017). Shows high-potential leaders how to create their own paths and build the essential skills needed to live up to their greatest promise. Also explains to leadership developers how to identify HiPos and facilitate their development.
- [“Shifting Mindsets: Questions that Lead to Results,”](#) Marilee Adams (Wharton Nano Tool, Aug. 2012). Helps quickly change the mindset of a team or individual leader from being “stuck” to finding possibilities and solutions by asking learning questions instead of judging questions.

REFERENCE:

“Effects of Networking on Career Success: A Longitudinal Study,” Hans-Georg Wolff and Klaus Moser, University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2009, Vol. 94, No. 1, 196 –206

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.