

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

CHANGING SOMEONE'S MIND: A POWERFUL NEW APPROACH

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: Jonah Berger, Associate Professor of Marketing, The Wharton School, and author of *The Catalyst: How to Change Anyone's Mind*

THE GOAL:

To change minds, organizations, industries, and the world, stop trying to persuade and instead encourage people to persuade themselves.

NANO TOOL:

No one likes to feel like someone is trying to influence them. The natural reaction to being told what to do, whether it's to support a change initiative, accept a starting salary, or stop smoking, is to resist by pushing back. The more you allow for autonomy, and allow them to participate in the process, the more effective you'll be. Use one or a combination of four proven tactics for helping guide people to make the choice you prefer.

ACTION STEPS:

- **Provide a menu:** Allow people to choose a path from a selection of your choice, giving them more say in how they'll get where you are hoping they'll go. Advertising agencies do this when presenting work to clients. Instead of offering one idea, which the client could then spend the rest of the meeting poking holes in, they offer two or three. This "bounded choice" provides autonomy and the greater likelihood one of the ideas will be chosen.
- **Ask, don't tell:** Statements like "junk food makes you fat" and "smoking causes cancer" don't change minds. Asking questions instead shifts the listener's role, much like providing a menu does. Rather than counterarguing or thinking about all the reasons they disagree with a statement, they're occupied with the task of answering the question (voicing their opinion about the issue — which most people are more than happy to do). Questions also increase buy-in. Because the answer they give is theirs, it's more likely to drive them to action. Think about how "Do you think junk food is good for you?" would work better than the statement.
- **Highlight a gap:** Show someone that there's a disconnect between their thoughts and actions, or a disparity between what they would recommend for others versus what they do themselves. When a project isn't working out, there are inevitably some people who are wedded to it, saying it just needs more time. Ask if they knew what they did today, would they start the project? Awareness of this dissonance can be enough to change minds.



- **Start with understanding:** Ask questions that can help you better understand why the person is resistant. By really listening to the responses, and quoting them back to the respondent, you create trust. This approach takes time, but eventually you will discover the underlying needs and motivations that must be tapped to break through the resistance.

HOW ORGANIZATIONS USE IT:

Savvy bosses know a potential hire will likely negotiate, asking for more money no matter how good the initial offer is. So they provide tradeoffs: an extra week of vacation reduces salary by \$5,000, or \$10,000 more in salary requires a reduction in equity, etc. Letting them choose which dimension is more important makes them feel like they have a more active role in the process, and satisfies their need to negotiate. It also helps to reach the so-called Pareto efficiency: letting potential hires choose between options equally acceptable to the boss while simultaneously allowing them to improve the outcome for themselves.

Nafeez Amin, co-owner of Sherpa Prep in Washington DC, was having trouble getting his students to study enough. Instead of telling them how many hours to devote to test prep, he asked them what they wanted from his program. He got responses about the top schools they wanted to attend and the GMAT scores they needed to get there. Then he asked how many hours they would need to devote to study to achieve their goals. Since they didn't know, they asked him for advice. This time when he told them, there was no resistance. They accepted the number of hours as the path to the scores they desired.

The Thai Health Promotion Foundation spent millions on advertising over 25 years promoting a hotline to help smokers quit their habit. Then they started the Smoking Kid campaign. With just a \$5,000 budget, they hired a group of 10-year-olds to walk up to smokers, pull out a cigarette, and ask for a light. The smokers didn't just refuse the request — they lectured the kids about the dangers of smoking. The kids then handed out a slip of paper with the hotline number and a simple message: "You worry about me, but why not about yourself?" Calls to the hotline jumped more than 60 percent and a video showing these interactions went viral, gaining more than 5 million views in just over a week.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- *The Catalyst: How to Change Anyone's Mind*, Jonah Berger (Simon & Schuster, 2020). Presents a proven way to change minds that relies not on the right words and a sound argument but on addressing the key barriers to change. Includes case studies for changing the minds of consumers, the boss, voters, and extremists.
- Jonah Berger teaches in Wharton Executive Education's [Strategic Marketing for Competitive Advantage](#).

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.