

## NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

# IMPROVE PRODUCTIVITY BY COMBATING WORKPLACE LONELINESS

**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:

Reduce workplace loneliness to improve performance across your organization.

### NANO TOOL:

There is increased focus on the negative influence of loneliness on a variety of health outcomes including earlier mortality, higher blood pressure, and increased risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke<sup>1</sup>. It has been taken so seriously that it has been called an “epidemic” by former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, and Britain even appointed a minister for loneliness.

In the workplace, loneliness makes people less effective by lowering their commitment to the organization and reducing their access to their peers, leading to poorer performance. In our study of 672 employees holding over 100 different positions and 114 supervisors across two organizations, my colleague Hakan Ozcelik and I found that the lonelier employees were, the lower the performance ratings they received from their supervisor.

Why? We discovered two mechanisms. One was that they were less emotionally committed to their organization, which meant they didn’t work as hard or perform as well. The second mechanism had to do with how coworkers perceived lonely employees. They viewed them as distant and less approachable. And because of that, lonelier people end up having less contact with other employees. This can lead them to be left out of informal, but useful, work conversations and don’t allow them to receive the benefit of the help they need from their coworkers.

It’s important to note that loneliness is not a personality trait. Research has shown that it is distinct from things like being depressed or lacking social skills. Loneliness is situational: it happens when individuals perceive that their social needs aren’t being met in a particular environment.

Unfortunately, once someone feels lonely in a given situation, they fall into a vicious cycle of unwittingly making things worse for themselves. While they desperately want to connect, the psychological phenomena that come with loneliness kick in. Lonelier people become self-centered and may either over-share or under-share personal information. Plus, they become hypervigilant socially, misinterpreting interactions with people. For instance, if out of the blue a coworker brings a lonelier person a cup of coffee, or invites them out for coffee, the lonelier employee might not even register the fact it was a nice thing for their colleague to do, or assume their colleague asks everyone to go to coffee. Colleagues, for their



part, may begin ignoring the lonely person or can even start to have resentment as the lonelier person behaves in ways that feel like they are unapproachable or rejecting their colleagues.

Many supervisors may assume that workplace loneliness is an individual's problem to work out on their own. But loneliness is social and situational, as mentioned above, and we now have evidence that it negatively influences work outcomes. In addition, loneliness is not simply the lonely employee's problem; it influences colleagues as well as performance outcomes, which should concern every manager.

## **ACTION STEPS:**

The good news is there are concrete actions managers can take to reduce loneliness. Studies have found that the most effective strategy is to get lonelier employees to change the way they are thinking about their appraisals of their situation, the people in it, and their environment. Because loneliness is a completely subjective judgment of whether people feel they are getting their social and emotional needs met in a particular situation, talking through their perceptions and getting them to reframe the situation would be the most effective. However, understanding that this could be difficult, there are other things that you can do situationally to make things better:

- 1. Create more positive and less negative emotion in workplace cultures.** In our study we found that a culture of companionate love (expressing affection, caring, compassion, and tenderness towards coworkers) helped to reduce the negative influence of loneliness on commitment. This type of positive work environment will help employees feel more comfortable around one another and encourage social interaction and positive communication. Avoid a culture of anger and frustration. We found in our study that this had the opposite effect of a culture of companionate love, and increased the negative influence of loneliness on commitment. Given that lonely employees are hypervigilant to social threat, a culture of anger will just exacerbate this.
- 2. Listen well.** Truly listening to people, including giving all of your attention, not interrupting, and asking good questions can help lonely people really feel seen and heard. Also, as we tend not to “see” lonely people as much, create opportunities for lonelier employees to be highlighted in their contribution to a project, or to share something unique from their non-work lives. However, make sure you really listen when they do so.
- 3. Encourage in-person or video communication.** By modeling a method other than email, voicemail, or text, you are showing your direct reports that you value personal connections. Plus, these types of communication have been shown to be both faster and clearer in most situations; the addition of physical cues makes it less likely that you'll be misunderstood. They also allow for the non-verbal communication that can better signal closeness and interest.
- 4. Encourage mentoring.** Pairs work well. But don't simply pair up a lonely employee with an outgoing one. The idea is to help foster a relationship, so the level of emotional intelligence or empathy of the mentor is more important than his or her sociability. The lonely person can also be the mentor. Also, don't think of pairing up two lonely people — lonelier people don't have the bandwidth to take care of other lonely people.
- 5. Start new hires as a cohort.** By going through the onboarding process as part of a group, new hires have the opportunity to get to know one another and build better connections.
- 6. Really focus on shared meaning of work.** One of the best ways to connect with other people is to work with them on something that you all believe in, that relates to your identity, and which needs everyone on the team to succeed. Shared work with meaning and purpose can bring people together.

## HOW ORGANIZATIONS USE IT:

Sandeep Kumar Aggarwal, founder and CEO of SKA Management, uses “Crush it Calls” to help his geographically diverse workforce build social connections and motivate one another. “During our Crush it Calls, every employee calls out a particular coworker for crushing it,” explained Aggarwal. “This is a chance for coworkers to show appreciation through recognition and engage an individual with the team.”

HubSpot has a monthly automated introduction to one employee, which allows people to expand who they know in the organization outside of their department and increase the potential for connection.

Airbnb brings new hires in as a group, intentionally fostering relationships among them. Global Head of Employee Experience at Airbnb Mark Levy says, “We create belonging by enabling them to form a group that hopefully stays together as they progress here through their careers. We schedule different kinds of lunches and meetings to help people to understand their colleagues they’re going to be working with. We ask all new hires to share a fun fact and why they came to work here, not just about their job, but who they are, what they are into and how they ended up working at Airbnb.”

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- “The Painful Cycle of Employee Loneliness, and How It Hurts Companies,” Sigal Barsade and Hakan Ozcelik (*Harvard Business Review*, Apr. 24, 2018). Discusses the authors’ research findings and offers insights for managers dealing with lonely employees.
- “No Employee an Island: Workplace Loneliness and Job Performance,” Hakan Ozcelik and Sigal Barsade (*The Academy of Management Journal*, Feb. 2018). Investigates the link between workplace loneliness and job performance, and highlights the importance of recognizing the pernicious power of workplace loneliness over both lonelier employees and their organizations.
- Sigal Barsade directs Wharton Executive Education’s [High-Potential Leaders: Accelerating Your Impact](#) and [Leadership in a New Era of Health Care](#). She also teaches in the [Advanced Management Program](#) and [The Adaptable Leader: Strategies for Emerging Leadership](#), among many other programs.

## REFERENCE:

- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5831910/>

## 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.