

## NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

# GET IT DONE: TWO TECHNIQUES TO FAST-TRACK YOUR GOALS

**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.

### THE GOAL

Reach individual and team goals by relying on short-term gratification instead of willpower.

### NANO TOOL

Need to ditch a bad habit? Want to start a positive new one, like adopting a productive morning routine, exercising, or eating healthier? Forget willpower. The research is clear: it doesn't work. We tend to be overconfident about how easy it is to be self-disciplined, but a big payoff far down the road—or even knowing that a change is simple or cheap—just isn't enough to keep us motivated. Economists call this tendency to favor instantly gratifying temptations over larger long-term rewards “present bias.” Unfortunately, it's universal, and one of the biggest barriers to change.

Instead of simply succumbing to what's most desirable in the moment (whether the latest spy novel, a bag of chips, or Twitter), “flip the script” by making short-term gratification work for you. In one study of the way people tackle change, more than two thirds of respondents told researchers that they typically focus on the benefits they expect to accrue in the long-run without regard for their short-term pain. Only 26 percent of those surveyed said they would try to make goal pursuit enjoyable in and of itself. That group was on to something. Turning your obstacles into enticements is one of the best motivators for change. Two proven methods for doing just that are described in the Action Steps below.

### ACTION STEPS

The following approaches take the fun that might typically distract us from our goals and uses it to transform an obstacle into an enticement—suddenly we want to go to the gym, focus at work, eat a healthier diet, and study harder. That kind of desire is a powerful motivator for change.

- 1. Bundle your temptations.** Based on the work of behavioral scientists Katy Milkman, Julia Minson, and Kevin Volpp, this technique recognizes that we struggle to do what's distasteful in the moment and looks for ways to make those activities sweeter.

To use it, you need to pair something you need to do with something you want to do. Need to focus on reading and answering emails first thing in the morning? Indulge in your favorite coffee while you're doing it—and only when you're doing it. Temptation bundling works best if you can actually restrict an indulgence to whenever you're doing a task that requires an extra boost of motivation, and it can be used to solve all kinds of problems ranging from making more home-cooked meals (no wine unless you're at the stove) to exercising (listen to audiobooks only at the gym, and not in your car or on the bus).



- 2. Make it fun.** Providing time, space, and tools for “goofing off” or otherwise having more fun at work can improve productivity, teamwork, and engagement—and trying it is relatively low-risk and low-cost. Letting employees bring a pet to work; adding a ping pong table to the cafeteria; and taking the occasional trip to a restaurant, theater, or museum can add an element of enjoyment. Gamification is another way to make something you don’t want to do more fun, motivating with rewards and gratification instead of punishment. Apps like Loselt! and FitBit use game-like features such as rewards (symbolic or real), a sense of competition, and leaderboards to help you lose weight or exercise more. Or get a group of like-minded colleagues together and decide attendance at your 10:30 coffee break is contingent on getting through your inbox. Managers and senior leaders can motivate employees to complete less-than-desirable tasks by adding gamified elements so long as people don’t feel manipulated but actually buy into the fun. Training programs, sales targets, and travel expense reports are a few applications, and most firms rely on existing software to help them (SAP and Mindspace are popular examples).

## HOW ORGANIZATIONS USE IT

Every day, nearly 100,000 passengers rush through Stockholm’s Odenplan metro station. Each one of them has a choice: to get to and from their train, they can take the stairs or the escalator. To encourage the former, making a difference to people’s health (nine percent of premature deaths worldwide are attributed to inadequate exercise), a team of technicians funded by Volkswagen’s “Fun Theory” initiative turned the staircase into a set of giant, working piano keys. The result? Because taking the stairs was now fun, 66 percent more people than usual chose the stairs over the escalator. See it for yourself [here](#).

Aetna, Cigna, and Humana use gamification to encourage employees to exercise (which in turn reduces absenteeism, increases productivity, and improves employee engagement). Humana’s Go365 program rewards participants who reach their health goals with Go365 Bucks that can be traded for items such as gift cards.

Tech company Asana, named one of the best places to work for parents in 2020, gives its employees a \$10,000 budget to decorate their workspaces. The Farmer’s Dog, a dog food company, “employs” dogs to keep human employees feeling loved and entertained (they even have official titles: Chief Inspirational Officer and Head of Playtime). When the coronavirus pandemic forced most U.S. employees to start working remotely, companies even found ways to make telecommuting more fun. Virtual happy hours became all the rage at companies like Zappos; some even got cute with meetup names like “Quaran-tinis.”

Deloitte gamified its leadership training program after having trouble getting executives to start and complete it. They added gamified features with the help of Badgeville to encourage participation and measure how many people were participating. The badges, leaderboards, and status symbols dropped the average completion time by 50 percent and increased the number of daily users of the program by almost 50 percent.

## CONTRIBUTOR TO THIS NANO TOOL

Katy Milkman, PhD, James G. Dinan Endowed Professor; Professor of Operations, Information and Decisions, The Wharton School

## KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION: RELATED EXECUTIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

[\*Leading Organizational Change\*](#), [\*The Adaptable Leader: Leading in a Virtual World\*](#), [\*Effective Decision Making: Thinking Critically and 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.

Excerpted from *How to Change: The Science of Getting from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be* by Katy Milkman; foreword by Angela Duckworth, in agreement with Portfolio, an imprint of Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. Copyright © Katherine L. Milkman, 2021.

# Wharton@Work