

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

A KEY TO BETTER LEADERSHIP: “CONFIDENT HUMILITY”

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

Improve your results by actively cultivating curiosity and staying in a learning mode throughout your career.

NANO TOOL

Confidence and humility are often seen as opposites. But if you reflect on the leaders you admire most, chances are that they embody both of these qualities in tandem. I call it confident humility.

Confident humility is being secure enough in your expertise and strengths to admit your ignorance and weaknesses. In [Think Again](#), I highlighted evidence that confidence without humility breeds blind arrogance, and humility without confidence yields debilitating doubt. Confident humility allows you to believe in yourself while questioning your strategies.

When the pandemic started in the spring of 2020, the NBA was the first major sports league to shut down. Commissioner Adam Silver displayed confident humility when he told his team, “I don’t know how we’re going to get games running again, but I believe in our ability to figure it out.” By telling his team he was confident in their capabilities but uncertain about their strategies, he invited them to rethink their assumptions and experiment with many different alternatives. That summer, they were the first league to reopen, and they managed to run a massive bubble without a single COVID-19 infection.

ACTION STEPS

- 1. Create a learning culture** (as opposed to a performance culture where the emphasis is solely on results) by acknowledging what you don’t know, challenging best practices, and rewarding people who test new ideas even if they don’t work. Evidence shows those in learning cultures innovate more and make fewer mistakes.
- 2. Give yourself the benefits of doubt;** doubts can motivate you to work harder and smarter by putting you in a beginner’s mindset. When you question your knowledge and strategies, you become motivated to seek out new insights, which can broaden and deepen your learning.
- 3. Identify a conflicting piece of information or opinion.** Research suggests that acknowledging even a single reason why we might be wrong can be enough to curb overconfidence. Two favorite questions are “How do you know?” and “What if we’re wrong?”



HOW LEADERS USE IT

Sara Blakely was selling fax machines door to door when she came up with the idea for footless pantyhose. But she had no knowledge of fashion retail or manufacturing. And although she believed she could start her own business, she knew she needed to expand her current skill set. She reached out to hosiery mills for help designing a prototype and learned how to apply for a patent herself to avoid costly attorney fees. Her belief in her capacity to learn, rather than in her existing knowledge and skills, allowed her to found and run Spanx, a \$1.2 billion company.

Before MIT professor Basima Tewfik (a Wharton PhD alum) began studying medical students who were starting clinical rotations, she had them complete a survey. They were asked how often they had “imposter” thoughts such as “I am not as qualified as others think I am,” and “People important to me think I am more capable than I think I am.” Then she observed them interacting with actors trained as patients with different diseases. Tewfik watched them interact with the patients and noted whether they were able to arrive at the correct diagnoses. The students who most often entertained thoughts of being “imposters” did just as well at diagnosing, and their bedside manner was superior, with higher ratings on empathy, respect, and professionalism.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS NANO TOOL

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KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION: RELATED EXECUTIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

[*High-Potential Leaders: Accelerating Your Impact*](#); [*Leading Organizational Change*](#); [*Leadership and Management Certificate Program*](#) (Adam Grant is an instructor).

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.