

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

CRISIS LEADERSHIP: HARNESS THE EXPERIENCE OF OTHERS

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

Adopt a habit of vicarious learning to ready yourself and your organization to weather any crisis.

NANO TOOL

Crises are leadership litmus tests—make-or-break challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, that are often unique and random, appearing out of nowhere with no clear roadmap. Many of those who prevail understand that crises are inevitable and seek to learn the lessons of experience. They then integrate those lessons in their decision making, framing mechanisms, and leadership processes and practices.

But learning must not be confined to the post-crisis period: gathering relevant examples and lessons should be ongoing, before, during, *and* after any crisis. And it must also not be confined to your own experiences. Analyzing and benchmarking what others do—be they competitors; regulators; policymakers; or leaders in organizations, industries, and sectors other than our own—is a chance to learn vicariously, helping to overcome complacency and lack of experience when a crisis hits. Those who miss this critical opportunity are left vulnerable to the next crisis because they fail to scan, prepare, see the bigger picture, and take in diverse perspectives.

ACTION STEPS**1. Before a Crisis: Early Warnings, Signal Detection, and Prevention**

This is when you need to drive a culture of learning and reflection that includes constant analysis of successes and failures (yours and others) and systemic issues that could lead to a crisis. Ask yourself and your team:

- How can you make this a day-to-day business process or function, and who needs to be involved?
- As you go through scenario planning, are there opportunities for vicarious learning from other leaders, organizations, or industries?
- How will you capture information that surfaces and integrate it into decision making?
- How will you determine any actions that need to be taken and by whom?



This is also when you should make time to assess your team or organization's capabilities and determine learning needs. Ask yourself and your team:

- How can you accurately determine any needs or shortfalls, and what additional input do you need?
- What kind of learning plan might you need in terms of targets, format, and frequency?
- How will you measure success here?

2. During a Crisis: Damage Containment and Driving Recovery

Even as you are in full crisis-management mode, you need to remain open to every opportunity to surface information and learn from as many diverse stakeholders exposed to the crisis as possible to minimize impact and accelerate recovery. Ask yourself and your team:

- Who (else) can you learn from? Whose perspective or expertise can shed important light on this crisis, and are there any players within or external to your organization who can augment your knowledge and understanding?
- If people are unwilling or feel unable to speak up, what can you do to include them?
- Should circumstances change fast, what barriers might there be to innovation, risk taking, or experimentation, and how can you overcome them?

3. After a Crisis: Recovery, Learning, and Reflection

As the crisis abates, you will want to focus efforts on putting together a post-crisis review to capture the lessons and translate them into concrete takeaways for the future. Ask yourself and your team:

- Who will you assemble among your stakeholders to include in your post-crisis review, and what are the questions you need to ask? How might you have done things differently to achieve different outcomes?
- How will you ensure that failure as well as success becomes a learning opportunity?
- How will you determine, document, and share the lessons and takeaways of this crisis, and what actions will you take to drive necessary change in your culture, systems, or processes?

HOW LEADERS LEARN

Former Deloitte CEO James Quigley (author this [Nano Tool](#)) says the key to his rise through the corporate ranks has been his commitment to being a "student of leadership." Those who have been in meetings with him will remember the leather-bound notebook he carries with him to take notes on other leaders, the lessons he learns from them, and other personal observations. Quigley also employs the "80/20 rule" in meetings he leads, never speaking more than 20 percent of the time because he says he learns not by speaking, but by listening.

The National Basketball Association (NBA) Commissioner Adam Silver says his effective management of scandals, including accusations of domestic violence against players and discrimination and racism against team owners, is due in large part to learning from others and translating those lessons into action. "We're studying everything that's been happening in the NFL," he said during a 2014 scandal. "The whole world's focused right now on what's happening around the NFL, so it would be foolish for us not to try to learn from everything that's happening. ... We're going to take a fresh look at everything we do." After a player was suspended following an assault conviction, Silver took further steps by publishing what one media outlet called "a thorough piece of literature, documenting exactly what happened, exactly who knew

about it, exactly how the league proceeded.” In this public statement, Silver listed the names of every adviser whose counsel he had sought—a diverse group that included lawmakers, domestic violence experts, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as well as different members of the NBA leadership team. Six years later, those lessons helped him lead through the pandemic, garnering praise for his decisive leadership and honest communication.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS NANO TOOL

Erika H. James, PhD, Dean, Reliance Professor of Management and Private Enterprise, The Wharton School; Lynn Perry Wooten, PhD, President, Simmons University. This Nano Tool is adapted from James’s and Wooten’s book *The Prepared Leader: Emerge from Any Crisis More Resilient than Before* (Wharton School Press, 2022).

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.