

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

THE MEETING STYLE THAT GENERATES BREAKTHROUGH SOLUTIONS

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 neuroscience-proven tool to improve group decision making and ensure that your team members work together effectively to create new solutions to tough challenges.

NANO TOOL

Most leaders would attest that true collaboration—the pooling of knowledge, perspectives, and brainpower of talented people—is a desired yet often elusive outcome. To change that, boosting the likelihood of generating breakthrough results, [draw on parallels with improvisational jazz](#) in your team meetings.

Through this approach, all team members get a chance to [contribute equally](#), listening attentively to each other and building on what is emerging, just as improvisational jazz musicians begin with a unison statement of a theme and then different members provide improvised solos of a fixed length. The approach also provides ample space for creativity and exploration. But the ensuing creative collaboration happens within a predefined meeting structure, which keeps the discussion on track.

The jazz process leverages [insights from neuroscience](#), specifically activating team members' "default mode network"—an interconnected system in our brains that is active when we are not focused on the outside world and that contributes to spontaneous, creative thought and introspection. Simultaneously, it also stimulates their "task execution networks," which are engaged when we focus on goal-directed actions to "get the job done." This dual activation enables [smooth transitions from thinking outside the box to implementing solutions](#).

ACTION STEPS

For management teams, this jazz-based tool, developed by Per Hugander, can be very effective for addressing complex challenges that have stalled progress. It is also effective as a starting point when people from different departments in an organization gather to collaborate on solving a problem or exploring new opportunities. Before you begin, let people know you'll be using an innovative new approach, based on proven neuroscience principles. Select a facilitator for the team meeting who uses a timer to ensure that the structure is adhered to throughout the process.

- 1. Shift to an explorer's mindset:** The facilitator begins by pointing out that engaging brain processes that promote creativity and idea generation begins with the right mindset. The emphasis should be on *exploring* the problem rather than solving it.



- 2. Introduce the topic and reflect on it:** One team member briefly introduces the topic (e.g., a new app that could impact sales), followed by a few minutes of silent, individual reflection by all group members, using prompts such as, “What is my perspective on this topic?” and “What are important factors to consider?”
- 3. Take a new perspective:** Research has shown that perspective-taking may be key to unlocking the [creative potential of diverse teams](#). An initial round of [perspective-taking](#) is a powerful tool to launch the conversation.

Each team member shares what they think is important for about three minutes, while the others actively try to understand the topic from the speaker’s perspective by using their imagination and asking curious questions. Seeing a challenge from different perspectives allows team members to gain a more rich and nuanced understanding of the challenge.

- 4. Engage in structured dialogue:** Two team members engage in a four-minute conversation to explore factors they feel are most important to the challenge. The other team members sit to the side, listening silently. The listeners are instructed to write down new ideas they may have so that they can stay focused on the conversation as it evolves.

When the four minutes have elapsed, two new team members continue the conversation where the first two left off. The process continues, allowing everyone time to contribute their thoughts and perspectives.

In larger groups, take a short break for individual reflection after three or four pair dialogues. During the break, team members pause for three to four minutes to think and take notes, following prompts such as, “What seems important now?” and “What should we explore further?” For teams with an uneven number of individuals, some may end up getting a bit more time, but otherwise try to distribute the time to contribute as evenly as possible.

If you have more time, you can repeat the dialogues, followed by a reflection break, three to four additional times. Try to switch the pairings so that team members speak to different individuals on each round.

- 5. Switch to free-flowing, learning-focused dialogue:** At this point, the team has usually surfaced and explored several new aspects of the topic, and should turn to free-flowing discussion about how to move forward. The facilitator’s goal is to keep the team in a learning and explorative mindset, while making sure that the next steps are clearly defined.

Sometimes a solution has become apparent. However, with most complex challenges there will still be uncertainties, so team members are encouraged to define at least three next steps and actions that will help them learn more about the challenge and how to proceed. Such steps might include a prototype, something they want to test, or an interview to gain perspectives or knowledge. Sometimes the best breakthrough ideas come from leaving a few of the questions unanswered for a few days and letting your subconscious play with a variety of solutions.

HOW ONE LEADER USES IT

The jazz approach to decision making has been used at Swedish bank SEB to help teams collaborate effectively and [make progress on important strategic opportunities](#) and challenges. As described in the Harvard Business School case “Leading Culture Change at SEB,” selected management teams go through a training program where they [develop perspective-taking skills](#) and put the skills to use during multiple jazz sessions. Members of the first team that participated in the training program said it helped them get past a crucial strategic challenge they had been struggling with for years. Another SEB team noted that the training and jazz sessions helped to increase customer acquisitions and market share.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS NANO TOOL

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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.