

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

STRENGTHEN YOUR LEADERSHIP WITH THE SCIENCE OF AWE

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

Develop an Awe Mindset for greater creativity, improved collaboration, and better decision making.

NANO TOOL

After two decades of teaching and research on happiness, psychology professor Dacher Keltner has one simple recommendation for those seeking joy and contentment: experience awe. Defined as “the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your current understanding of the world,” awe doesn’t just inspire feelings of happiness, but can also lead to experiences of greater connection, meaning, and purpose. In business, Kelter says the power of awe can be harnessed to foster creativity and innovation, collaboration, and improved decision making. Even better, it is easily accessible to everyone.

Research shows that awe experiences can lead to the sense of a small or vanishing self, a state in which your sense of being distinct, independent, and in control recedes and you feel part of something larger. They are a powerful antidote to isolation and loneliness, and counter the feeling that, acting alone, we must solve all of our problems and control our environment. We shift from a competitive mindset to the perception of ourselves as part of networks or ecosystems of more interdependent, collaborating individuals. We sense that we are part of a chapter in the history of a family, a community, an organization, or a culture.

Developing an Awe Mindset begins at the start of your day, with just five minutes devoted to guided reflection. The Action Steps below offer guidance in how to then reflect on each of the “Eight Wonders” that commonly elicit experiences of awe across cultures, geographies, ages, and other demographic differences.

ACTION STEPS

To begin, allow yourself to be open to an Awe Mindset. As the author of the Tao Te Ching advised in the 6th century BCE, “If you want to become *full*, let yourself be *empty*.” Put down your devices, take some deep breaths, and pause. Then, choose one of the Eight Wonders and reflect on it for five minutes.

- 1. Moral Beauty** (moments when exceptional virtue, character, and ability are evident): Consider people who inspire you through their acts of courage and determination, maintaining dignity and integrity when facing great challenges, or achieving the highest levels of performance through a blend of hard work and ability.
- 2. Collective Effervescence** (a force that merges a group of people into a collective self): Take a walk around a busy city, noticing how your movements become synchronized with groups of people; dance with others; recall your attendance at a live event such as a concert or play.



- 3. Nature:** Step outside and look at the sky, a sunset, trees, or clouds. Witness a rainstorm. If you can't be outside, experience videos of nature that engage through sight and sound.
- 4. Music:** Listen to a piece of music that resonated deeply with you when you were younger, then contemplate its meaning to you.
- 5. Visual Design:** Regard a work of art, which could be a painting, a building, a film, or even the striking patterns in a cell viewed under a microscope, that has particular significance or that you simply find to be beautiful. How does viewing the work change or help you transcend the typical ways you use to perceive your life and the world around you?
- 6. Transcendence** (spiritual, religious, and/or mystical experiences that foster a sense of meaning): Contemplate a force, big idea, or value that you care deeply about. Write down how it is working in your life and how you are implementing it.
- 7. Stories of Life and Death:** Think about the cycles of life, changes in flora and fauna, the lifespan of someone you love, or a new idea that becomes popular and gains traction.
- 8. Big Ideas** (philosophical insights, scientific discoveries, mathematical equations, systems thinking, or personal realizations): Consider a discovery or insight and its meaning to you—how has it changed your worldview or helped you grow in wisdom?

HOW LEADERS USE IT

Federal Judge Jeremy Fogel listens to awe-inspiring music before difficult work and touts mindfulness as a powerful tool judges can use to help with their decision making. "Listening to the kind of music I do—my favorites are Bach, Handel, and the Baroque-era composers—almost always has a calming effect on me, and the structure of the music seems to engage my attention. ... If for some reason I can't do that, I notice a higher level of stress as I go through the day," he says.

When he's ruminating on a problem, Pixar director Pete Docter takes long walks in nature, often with some note cards and a pen. "I've always liked walking because it's kind of therapeutic. I feel like it relaxes me ... and I can think about stuff because it's free of distraction." He generally starts a walk "with a lot of anxiety and things that I'm chewing on. ... [I]t kind of takes you out of your own head. And by the end of it, it definitely feels like I'm able to focus in on the things that are more important, and leave a lot of the anxiety."

Dr. Leif Hass not only gives "Health and Happiness" prescriptions to his patients, which include directives such as "sing in the shower," "call an old friend," or "go for a walk in a beautiful place," but he taps into collective effervescence with fellow practitioners during his work in hospitals by convening short dance parties during huddles.

For Dr. Maya Shankar, a cognitive scientist; senior advisor in the Obama White House, where she founded and served as chair of the White House Behavioral Science Team; and the creator, executive producer, and host of the podcast *A Slight Change of Plans*, many of our daily social interactions that make up our work life surface themes of moral beauty—sacrifice, courage, wisdom, and kindness. She brings them into our awareness through great questions (like on her podcast) and stories (in her writing), providing inspiration and purpose in the work of her listeners and in the people they share such stories with.

CONTRIBUTOR TO THIS NANO TOOL

Dacher Keltner, professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley; faculty director of UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center; and author of [Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life](#) (Penguin Press, 2023)

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.