

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

GIVING FEEDBACK THAT WORKS: PLANT SEEDS OF CONFIDENCE

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.

NANO TOOL

“Whether you think you can, or you think you can’t—you’re right.”
—Henry Ford

Most managers dread giving feedback. Offering a blend of praise and criticism is supposed to help your team members do more of what they’re good at and improve in areas where they’ve missed the mark. But research shows it rarely works that way (see the Nano Tool [“The Annual Performance Review: Should You Eliminate It?”](#)). In her book *How to Change*, Wharton professor Katy Milkman shares a different idea: work to build people’s confidence if you want them to achieve a goal. In Virgil’s words from around 20 BCE, “they can because they think they can.”



Scientists like Alia Crum, associate professor of psychology at Stanford University, have shown that we can create expectations about what *will* happen, and that in turn can influence what actually happens in four key ways. First, our beliefs can change our emotions. Positive expectations often generate positive feelings, which have a host of physiological benefits such as alleviating stress and reducing blood pressure. And that can make a big difference in what happens next. Our beliefs can also redirect our attention, keeping us focused on our goal instead of on minor setbacks and inconveniences along the way. There is also evidence that beliefs can improve motivation and even affect our physiology.

On the other hand, research confirms that when we don’t believe we have the capacity to change, we don’t make as much progress changing. That belief can be reinforced when a manager offers what they perceive to be helpful advice on what’s going wrong and how to fix it; that helpful advice may inadvertently be perceived as criticism that could weaken confidence.

Whatever goals you and your team are working toward, their success may depend in part on how much you believe in your ability to achieve it. The three Action Steps below can help you become a confidence builder, unleashing the potential of each of your team members.

ACTION STEPS

- 1. Ask for advice.** Research by Northwestern University’s Assistant Professor of Management Lauren Eskreis-Winkler suggests that when managers ask for a team member’s advice instead of offering their own, they convey confidence and trust in the team member and their abilities. That then leads them to feel more motivated than when they were given the very same caliber of advice. Even on the spot, with no time to think hard about it, people are capable of producing useful insights about how to better tackle the same goals they themselves struggle with, and the act of *giving* advice has been proven to improve the advice-giver’s own performance.

- 2. Place underperforming employees into mentoring roles.** It might seem counterintuitive, but it could boost their lagging performance. It's no accident that well-regarded programs that are designed to help us achieve lasting change, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), encourage members to mentor one another. People in AA get another AA member as a "sponsor" when they sign up, but the sponsor isn't just there to help a mentee stay sober. Becoming a sponsor may help you by boosting your self-confidence. Also, thinking deeply about the best way to succeed at a goal so that you can offer guidance and being accountable to someone else should also strengthen your own commitment. Mentoring programs in companies and schools serve this dual purpose, too, whether or not they were designed with these additional benefits in mind.
- 3. Model a growth mindset, and teach others to adopt one.** People with a growth mindset recognize that abilities, including intelligence, are not fixed and that effort has a profound effect on a person's potential. Adopting a growth mindset boosts confidence and helps you bounce back from setbacks. See specific Action Steps in the Nano Tool "[Shifting Mindsets: Questions that Lead to Results.](#)"

HOW LEADERS USE IT

Mike Mangini, lead drummer for world-famous heavy metal band Dream Theater, says he developed the confidence he needed to rise to stardom through requests for assistance from other drummers. Mangini spent the 1980s as a software engineer, practicing incessantly on the drums at night and on the weekends, daydreaming of a big career in music with little hope of achieving his goal. Then, drummers in a shared practice space unexpectedly began asking him to give them lessons. Their requests gave Mangini a newfound confidence. If so many people thought he had a special talent, maybe he did. Mangini quit his day job and devoted himself full time to drumming. Today, he's one of the best-known drummers in the business. He attributes his success, in no small part, to being asked to give other people advice.

Max Bazerman, the Jesse Isidor Straus Professor of Business Administration at the Harvard Business School, has won numerous awards for mentoring. The secret to his success is three-fold. First, he offers clear, direct advice sparingly, and only when prompted. More often, he provides students with chances to share their own suggestions. Second, Bazerman also strongly encourages his more senior mentees to work on research with his newest advisees, which helps the advanced doctoral students just as much as the newcomers. Third, he has an unshakable faith that each student he advises has remarkable talents, ranging "from very smart to spectacular." As Bazerman's students confront the challenges that are inevitable in any competitive career, they rarely grapple with the kind of doubt that plagues most who pursue a PhD—because of Bazerman's confidence in them.

Pete Carroll, one of only three coaches to have won both a Super Bowl and a College Football National Championship, is widely admired for the confidence he has in his Seattle Seahawks players to work hard and get better. He studied performance psychology early in his career, and he puts a strong emphasis on players' development. It begins with an investment that's highly visible to players: a department of specialists concerned with their health and performance, including a life skills consultant/addiction counselor and a high-performance sports psychologist. Carroll also champions positive energy—players are expected to leave negativity in the locker room and are celebrated by their coaches for every achievement, even during practice. Players are expected to do the same for each other—blaming is not an option.

CONTRIBUTOR TO THIS NANO TOOL

Katy Milkman, PhD, James G. Dinan Endowed Professor; Professor of Operations, Information and Decisions, The Wharton School; author of *How to Change: The Science of Getting from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be* (Portfolio, 2021).

KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION: RELATED EXECUTIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

[*Leading Organizational Change*](#) and [*Effective Decision Making: Thinking Critically and Rationally*](#)

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.