NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

IMPACT VS. TIME: A LEADER'S GUIDE TO SLOW PRODUCTIVITY

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.

GOAL

Cut the clutter to focus on core priorities using proven strategies.

NANO TOOL

We all know them: bosses or co-workers who overload themselves, believing that good work requires faster responses to email and chats, more meetings, more tasks, and more hours. They cram professional effort into every corner of their lives and embrace busyness as a badge of pride, hoping it adds up to something meaningful. But research shows those efforts not only don't equate with enhanced job performance—they're also detrimental to our health and our relationships[1]

What's needed is a transformation of our modern understanding of professional accomplishment. We need to reject the badge, seeing overload as an obstacle to producing great results rather than an effective approach. An alternative to the assumptions driving our current exhaustion is the philosophy of Slow Productivity, which can apply to anyone who has a reasonable degree of autonomy in their job. The following Action Steps can guide you in embracing the first principle of Slow Productivity: reducing your commitments to more **fully embrace and advance a smaller number of important projects**.

ACTION STEPS

By paring down obligations, leaders can concentrate their energy and resources on key priorities and improve decision making, which leads to more impactful and higher-quality outcomes. **Research shows you're more likely to succeed if you set intentional limits on three levels:** missions, which are your big, ongoing goals; projects, which are the milestones on the way to those goals; and daily goals, which are what you put on your to-do list on any given day.

1. **Limit missions:** One or two main objectives that direct your professional life is ideal; five or more are hard to maintain. If you must have more than two, focus on the second and third action steps to keep control of your workload.
2. **Limit projects:** Maintain clarity and control over your schedule. If someone asks you to work on a project, determine how much time it would take and then schedule it on your calendar. If you can't find the time on your calendar, you don't have the time to do it. Decline, or cancel something else to make time for it. And limit the time you have available for scheduling—you don't want to end up with a packed calendar. Saying no is easier when you have hard evidence that it's the only reasonable answer.
3. **Limit daily goals:** Use these three techniques to gain control of your workdays:
    a. Make other people work more by creating a Reverse Task List: on a shared document, list the major categories of tasks you tackle in your job. When someone asks you to take on some small obligation, direct them to add it to the

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task list themselves with all of the information you need to complete the task. By clearly communicating the specifics of your current workload, you demonstrate the need for exact task descriptions, and a clearly overstuffed list may deter people from adding to it.

a. Avoid "task engines": choose projects based on how many tasks they require to complete, not just how much overall time it takes.

a. Put repeat tasks on autopilot by creating rituals: for example, invoicing every Monday morning at the coffee shop, completing evaluations on Fridays from home, or discussing current projects with coworkers during scheduled office hours.

HOW LEADERS USE IT

Warren Buffett's famous quip, "The difference between successful people and really successful people is that really successful people say no to almost everything," takes on new meaning in light of Slow Productivity. His 5/25 Rule pares down missions in three steps: write a list of your top 25 career goals, circle the five most important goals, and avoid the remaining 20 at all costs (or at least until the top five are achieved). "You've gotta keep control of your time and you can't unless you say no. You can't let people set your agenda in life," explained Buffett.

Benjamin Franklin embraced the tenets of Slow Productivity later in his career. Seeking to train a manager to open a third printing-press franchise, he hired a printing assistant who then fell ill. During his recovery, the assistant's impressive work led Franklin to scrap the franchise plans and keep him as foreman. The printing business became more profitable, giving the notoriously hard-working Franklin the ability to turn his attention to more significant projects, including his work on electricity. He wrote at the time, "I am settling my old accounts and hope soon to be quite a master of my own time."

Psychologist Megan Rogers, an associate professor at Texas State University, uses the autopilot technique by working on goals and projects on specific days (or portions of days). "It's been extremely helpful to me. I try to schedule student mentorship meetings back-to-back on a couple of days, teaching tasks on a different day, and reserve one full day for deep research work (generally focused on one or two papers) without any interruptions. I'm a big advocate of minimizing task-switching as much as possible."

CONTRIBUTOR TO THIS NANO TOOL

Cal Newport, PhD, professor of computer science at Georgetown University. His academic research focuses on distributed algorithms and challenging network scenarios. Newport has authored several influential books including his latest, *Slow Productivity: The Lost Art of Accomplishment without Burnout* (Portfolio/Penguin, 2024), on which this Nano Tool is based.

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.

1. A 2023 survey by the American Psychological Association (APA) found that 77 percent of workers reported experiencing work-related stress in the last month, with 57 percent indicating negative impacts such as emotional exhaustion and lack of motivation. A 2021 World Health Organization report showed that overwork can increase the risk of stroke, heart disease, and ultimately death.

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