

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

SMALL SHIFTS, BIG IMPACT: ELEVATE YOUR LEADERSHIP

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

Enhance your leadership effectiveness and drive better team and organizational outcomes by adopting simple new practices.

NANO TOOL

Leadership success doesn't always require sweeping changes or massive overhauls. Often, it's the small, intentional adjustments that have the biggest impact. From refining how you give feedback to rethinking how you start a meeting, simple, research-backed practices can amplify your influence, improve decision making, and strengthen team dynamics. The following Action Steps, based on proven strategies, can be adopted immediately to achieve better outcomes.



ACTION STEPS

- 1. Give yourself the benefits of doubt.** As Adam Grant suggests in [this Nano Tool](#), doubts can motivate you to work harder and smarter by putting you in a beginner's mindset. When you question your knowledge and strategies, you become motivated to seek out new insights, which can broaden and deepen your learning.
- 2. Zoom in and out.** One of marketing professor [Jerry Wind's recommendations](#) for shaking up your thinking is considering the issue at the heart of a business decision from both wide and narrow perspectives. Zooming out, how might the decision affect your shareholders, the community, or global markets? Zooming in, how could it impact your own life or that of a customer? Zooming in and out helps you avoid potential blind spots and quickly identify new possibilities. It provides a reality check that ensures the decisions made by you and your team will be on track, even under shifting conditions or in complex environments.
- 3. Ask, don't tell.** Whether you're actively trying to change someone's mind or convincing them to embrace an idea, statements such as "Flexible work schedules make people more productive" don't change minds. In [this Nano Tool](#) based on Jonah Berger's best-selling *The Catalyst: How to Change Anyone's Mind* (Simon & Schuster, 2020), Berger says asking questions instead shifts the listener's role. Rather than counterarguing or thinking about all the reasons they disagree with a statement, they're occupied with the task of answering the question (voicing their opinion about the issue—which most people are more than happy to do). Questions also increase buy-in. Because the answer they give is theirs, it's more likely to drive them to action. Think about how "Do you think people are more productive when they have flexible work schedules?" would work better than the statement.
- 4. Step away.** The brain is often at its most creative when it's not working on a specific problem, which is why people tend to have their best new ideas while driving, performing routine tasks, or even in the shower. In [this Nano Tool](#), neuroscientist Michael Platt says when you need a fresh approach to an issue, try focusing on it briefly to get the situation clearly

defined, then put it aside. Your subconscious mind—which is often the source of novel ideas—will continue work on the task while you focus on mundane activities or even overnight as you sleep. New solutions can naturally bubble up to consciousness after this form of “creative procrastination.”

HOW LEADERS USED (OR SHOULD HAVE USED) IT

Before MIT professor Basima Tewfik began studying medical students who were starting clinical rotations, she had them complete a survey. They were asked how often they had “imposter” thoughts such as “I am not as qualified as others think I am,” and “People important to me think I am more capable than I think I am.” Then she observed them interacting with actors trained as patients with different diseases, noting whether they were able to arrive at the correct diagnoses. The students who most often entertained thoughts of being “imposters” did just as well at diagnosing, and their bedside manner was superior, with higher ratings on empathy, respect, and professionalism.

Following two fatal crashes involving the Boeing 737 MAX aircraft in 2018 and 2019, CEO Dennis Muilenburg faced criticism for prioritizing profits over safety and for the company’s inadequate response to the crises. Under his leadership, Boeing was accused of pressuring regulators and failing to address safety concerns promptly, leading to significant reputational damage and financial losses. In December 2019, Muilenburg was ousted from his position as CEO.

Nafeez Amin, co-owner of Sherpa Prep in Washington DC, was having trouble getting his students to study enough. Instead of telling them how many hours to devote to test prep, he asked them what they wanted from his program. He got responses about the top schools they wanted to attend and the GMAT scores they needed to get there. Then he asked how many hours they would need to devote to study to achieve their goals. Since they didn’t know, they asked him for advice. This time when he told them, there was no resistance. They accepted the number of hours as the path to the scores they desired.

Former LinkedIn CEO Jeff Weiner has been a strong proponent of walking during the workday, emphasizing its role in eliminating distractions and enhancing productivity. He has noted that walking meetings in particular foster more productive interactions by removing typical office interruptions. Walking has been shown to increase creativity because it allows your brain to wander and daydream—which is what researchers discovered is “active problem-solving mode.” By stepping away and removing yourself from technology and other distractions, the seemingly unproductive time spent away from your desk can actually help you come up with your best ideas.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS NANO TOOL

Adam Grant, the Saul P. Steinberg Professor of Management at the Wharton School, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, host of the *WorkLife* podcast, and author of four best-selling books including *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don’t Know*; Jerry Wind, the Lauder Professor Emeritus of Marketing and director of the SEI Center for Advanced Studies on Management at the Wharton School; Jonah Berger, associate professor of marketing at the Wharton School and internationally bestselling author of four books including *Magic Words: What to Say to Get Your Way*; Michael Platt, director of the Wharton Neuroscience Initiative, James S. Riepe University Professor in the Marketing Department at the Wharton School, professor in the Department of Neuroscience of the Perelman School of Medicine, professor in the Department of Psychology of the School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pennsylvania, and author of *The Leader’s Brain*.

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.