

## NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

# BELONGING WITHOUT BORDERS: LOCATION-INCLUSIVE TEAMS

**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

Create a foundation where **everyone** in your organization feels like they belong and are included, no matter where they work from on any given day.

### NANO TOOL

As teams become more geographically distributed than ever, spanning office sites, remote work locations, and various hybrid schedules<sup>1</sup>, the physical distance and limited in-person interaction—which is the norm for many organizations—can reduce team effectiveness and employee engagement by creating siloed information, weakening the sense of connection to colleagues and the organization’s culture and goals, and reducing opportunities to grow and learn.

To address the challenge, team leaders should consider *location inclusion*—a commitment to valuing individuals no matter where they live or work. At its core, location inclusion is about fostering a sense of belonging across your organization; bridging time zones; and ensuring equal access to information, people, roles, and growth opportunities, regardless of physical location.

To manage for location inclusion, it is essential to recognize that you are operating in a geographically distributed environment—both distance bias and recency bias are exacerbated when that reality isn’t acknowledged and the need to mitigate them is neglected. Distance Bias<sup>2</sup> (aka Proximity Bias) is our brain’s natural tendency to put more importance on the people and things that are closer to us than those that are farther away. Similarly, Recency Bias puts more value on the people that you have communicated with or seen more recently. By adjusting behaviors to be more location inclusive, organizations can drive deeper engagement, empowering employees to feel connected, valued, and motivated—no matter where they are.

### ACTION STEPS

- 1. Map Your Team.** Many teams, especially cross-functional teams, may not know where their members are located, and this can cause tension. A great first step is to use [this template](#) to map your team’s geographic locations and capture their hybrid schedules (when applicable). Then discuss the insights from the exercise with your team to decide what actions to take.
- 2. Provide Virtual Access to Information.** In in-office environments, there can be a tendency to store and display some information just on-site. This can disadvantage people who don’t frequently come to the office, if at all. Instead, consider using cloud-based tech tools to share information and make collaboration easier, and creating physical “leave-behinds” that can be posted in **ALL** locations, including work-from-home locations, such as a laminated card of your team’s mission and values.



- 3. Incorporate Asynchronous Communication.** Most organizations rely heavily on synchronous communication to get work done. Asynchronous communication—when a real-time response is not expected, as through email, Microsoft Teams or Slack, project management tools, discussion forums, video messaging (an emerging and effective method using a tool like Loom or Zoom Clips), or some other tool—creates a more level playing field across locations and time zones. People can complete work and respond to communication when and how it works best with their schedules and still meet timeline needs and business objectives. Consider creating a better balance of synchronous and asynchronous communication to create greater location inclusion.
- 4. Create Location-Inclusive Meetings.** Audit your meetings to determine what you could do to ensure all meeting attendees feel included regardless of where they are located (in an office conference room or remote). Research shows that in hybrid meetings, remote participants reported a significantly lower score for “having a high degree of influence in decisions affecting them.”<sup>3</sup> Consider holding “Digital-First” meetings if even one teammate is virtual; instead of gathering in a conference room, have everyone log in from their own device and their own workspace so everyone experiences the meeting the same way. Or if some participants are in the same conference room and some participants are joining remotely, ask everyone in the conference room to also log into the video conference from their laptop with their cameras turned on. This ensures equal access to in-meeting features such as raised hands and chat, and it’s easier for everyone who is remote to see each person in the room. Note: Some newer video conferencing equipment systems negate the need for this by already providing close ups of each person in the room and also a wide-angle view of the full room.
- 5. Don’t Be an In-Office Magnet.** As a leader, your behaviors will impact the behaviors of the people on your team. If you choose to go into the office more often than you’re expected to, your team members may feel that they also need to come in more frequently. Consider ways to provide your team members with access to you that don’t always require in-person facetime, including setting standard virtual office hours when you are available to meet on a first-come, first-served basis and scheduling virtual coffee chats for connecting one-on-one or in small groups. You might also create a #watercooler channel in MS Teams, Slack, or another tool for more informal conversations. Coming together in-person is important, but it doesn’t have to be on a daily or weekly basis for a team to be effective and connected. Teams can still get these benefits from gathering three to four times per year.
- 6. Review Talent Management Processes for Distance Bias.** A majority of senior leaders agree that in-person workers probably benefit from proximity bias<sup>4</sup>. To address the inequity, take a deep dive into your people processes to identify where Distance Bias may exist so that there is equal opportunity and access for people to advance their careers regardless of where they live or work. Areas to review may include: performance management processes, career pathing (rotations, promotions, assignments), rewards and recognition programs, mentoring programs, and hiring programs.

## HOW COMPANIES USE IT

Tech firm Atlassian operates with an “internet-first” (not office-first) mindset. They have a “Team Anywhere” that supports their globally distributed workforce of more than 12,000 people to work together across distance. They have found that bringing people together just three to four times per year has a greater impact on connection than sporadic office attendance<sup>5</sup>. Atlassian’s data shows that their team gatherings increase team connection by 27 percent, and this boost lasts four to five months. These types of events are especially effective for new graduates and new hires: 96 percent of new graduates told them that they felt connected to their team after a team gathering compared to 74 percent before they attended an in-person offsite.

Insurance company Allstate made a big move toward flexible work in 2020 when it reduced its real estate footprint, which included selling its Illinois headquarters. Prior to the pandemic, about 20 percent of its 53,000 Allstaters worked remotely; now 99 percent are either remote or hybrid<sup>6</sup>. Previously, for career progression many roles required a rotation working out of headquarters, but this change has expanded opportunities for internal talent since now for most situations moving into a new

role no longer requires moving to a new location. In 2023, Allstate was able to fill 49 percent of open roles with internal team members by leaning into this location-inclusive approach to career mobility<sup>7</sup>.

Tech company Dropbox introduced its Virtual First model in 2020, which meant that remote work became the primary experience for all employees, while also providing opportunities for employees to gather at least quarterly for in-person collaboration. As a globally distributed company, 92 percent of employees work with peers across time zones, and 73 percent say clear communication and documentation are the most effective ways to support asynchronous collaboration<sup>8</sup>. Dropboxers moved to “non-linear workdays” with defined core collaboration hours that overlap across time zones while still allowing for individuals to block time for individual focused work. They moved away from a culture of back-to-back meetings to an “async by default” mindset, so that meetings are reserved for discussion, debate, and decision making, not for FYIs and updates<sup>9</sup>. Using their own tech products, like Dropbox Paper and Dropbox Dash, has enabled a better balance of async communication.

## Contributor to this Nano Tool

[Sacha Connor](#) is the CEO of Virtual Work Insider, which teaches teams the skills to lead in hybrid, distributed, and remote work environments. Since 2010, Connor has been leading hybrid, geographically distributed, and remote teams, while working remotely herself. As one of the first remote marketing directors at The Clorox Company, she led brands worth more than \$250M while remote for eight years and was the first fully remote member of the leadership team for the \$1B Homecare business unit.

## About Nano Tools

Nano Tools for Leaders<sup>®</sup> was conceived and developed by Deb Giffen, MCC, Director of Innovative Learning Solutions at Wharton Executive Education. It is jointly sponsored by Wharton Executive Education and Wharton’s Center for Leadership and Change Management, Michael Useem, Director. Nano Tools Academic Director is Professor John Paul MacDuffie, Professor of Management at the Wharton School and Director of the Program on Vehicle and Mobility Innovation (PVMI) at Wharton’s Mack Institute for Innovation Management.

1. <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/in-the-office-it-is-all-about-moments-that-matter>; [https://wfhrefsearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/WFHResearch\\_updates\\_January2025.pdf](https://wfhrefsearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/WFHResearch_updates_January2025.pdf)
2. <https://neuroleadership.com/your-brain-at-work/seeds-model-biases-affect-decision-making/>
3. [https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/AISNET/9954cc33-febd-4d00-a506-9c0b32e65c70/UploadedImages/ECIS\\_2023\\_papers/Paper\\_1\\_12CNOW.pdf](https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/AISNET/9954cc33-febd-4d00-a506-9c0b32e65c70/UploadedImages/ECIS_2023_papers/Paper_1_12CNOW.pdf)
4. <https://www.executivenetworks.com/the-2023-future-of-working-and-learning-report/>
5. <https://www.atlassian.com/blog/distributed-work/enterprise-executive-challenges-2024-survey>; Atlassian surveys team members before and after in-person events, asking participants to answer this question on a scale from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”): I feel a strong sense of connectedness in my team.
6. <https://www.allstatecorporation.com/stories/future-of-flexible-work.aspx>
7. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/inside-allstates-flex-work-experimentation-strategy/id1679987888?i=1000650138180>
8. <https://blog.dropbox.com/topics/company/virtual-first-2023-our-learnings-as-a-lab-for-distributed-work>
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