

## NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

### LOOK THEM IN THE EYE: STRENGTHEN TEAMS AND TRUST

**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.

*This Nano Tool for Leaders® was developed in collaboration with the [Wharton AI & Analytics Initiative](#).*

#### GOAL

Strengthen trust and meaningful human connection in teams—virtually or in person—in just two minutes.

#### NANO TOOL

In times of rising polarization, distrust, and a global loneliness epidemic, leaders face more than operational challenges—they face a deeply human one: how to build trust, cohesion, and collaboration across differences. A simple, powerful tool can meet this need: two-minute dyadic meditation boosts social closeness, positive perceptions, and prosocial behavior—even between strangers, even online.

While most know meditation as a solo, inward practice, dyadic meditation connects participants directly—cultivating awareness, presence, and shared humanity through mutual attention. One form, the Just-Like-Me Meditation, has long been used in retreats and compassion training. Partners simply gaze into each other's eyes while silently reflecting on prompts about shared human experience.

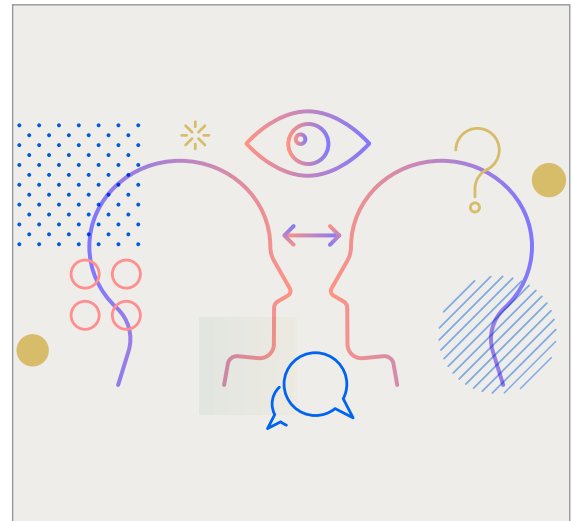
For the first time, this practice has been [scientifically tested](#). At the Wharton Neuroscience Initiative, Dr. Vera Ludwig and Dr. Michael Platt found it significantly boosted closeness, positive partner perceptions, and prosocial behavior. It also led to synchronized smiles in virtual sessions and heart rate synchrony in each person—a biological marker of trust and resonance. In just minutes, it builds the foundation for connection, collaboration, and aligned action.

While the exercise is simple, it requires a kind of inner strength—being fully present and seeing another person clearly, without looking away, is an underrated act of leadership. It can signal calm, grounded presence, and a deep respect for the person across from you.

#### ACTION STEPS

##### 1. Introduce the practice

Introduce the exercise as a leadership tool for building relational intelligence, strengthening collaboration, and improving team dynamics. Emphasize that it's voluntary and involves no talking or personal disclosures. Let participants know that smiling or laughing is fine—initial awkwardness is normal and often fades with repetition. In fact, some study participants found smiling helped ease the impact of increased connection (which typically fades with repetition).



## 2. Create a safe container

Mention that the exercise demands presence and courage. Making prolonged eye contact and connecting without words goes against the grain of most professional—and even personal—interactions. But this willingness to hold someone's gaze and be fully present is precisely what makes the practice so powerful. That said, let participants know that if direct eye contact feels too uncomfortable, they are welcome to maintain connection in other ways—such as by gently focusing on their partner's hair, hands, or another area that feels more comfortable.

## 3. Pair participants with intention and set the stage

Pairing across roles, genders, or departments can be effective and illuminating. If there is high discomfort or worry around power dynamics, however, you could consider working with same-hierarchy-level or same-gender pairings.

**In person:** Seat one group while the other rotates at timed intervals, or let participants walk around freely to music and pair up when it stops. A facilitator reads the prompts aloud. Tailor as needed for accessibility.

**Online:** Use breakout rooms. Share prompts in the chat, via screen share, or via a shared document.

## 4. Guide the exercise (2 minutes per round)

Partners sit or stand in silence, gaze at each other, and inwardly repeat and contemplate one of the following phrases (select or adapt as appropriate):

1. "Just like me, this person has felt sadness, loneliness, and pain."
2. "Just like me, this person has felt joy, fulfillment, and gratitude."
3. "Just like me, this person wishes to meet their needs and contribute to the needs of others."
4. "Just like me, this person longs for peace, love, and self-expression."
5. "Just like me, this person has felt unworthy or inadequate."
6. "Just like me, this person wishes to be loved."

Run between one and six rounds depending on time and group size.

## 5. Debrief, reflect, and measure impact

Invite brief, optional reflections. Ask: "How did this experience shift your perspective or motivation?" Emphasize openness and non-judgment. You could also ask participants to rate feelings of trust or connection before and after. In the Wharton Neuroscience study, participants reported increased closeness, warmer partner ratings, and greater prosocial intentions.

If you anticipate that silent, eye-based interactions are out of your group's comfort zone, consider using a more conversational approach instead—such as the evidence-based Fast Friends Exercise, described in [this Nano Tool](#).

## HOW LEADERS CAN USE IT

A senior leadership team can use this exercise at the start of a retreat to reset dynamics and foster alignment. Hybrid or global teams reuniting after remote work can use it to rebuild trust and cohesion. It's also effective for bridging divides, breaking silos, and re-energizing teams facing burnout or tension. Whether opening a tough conversation or strengthening culture, the practice helps teams reconnect—not just as colleagues, but as human beings.

## CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS NANO TOOL

Vera Ludwig, PhD, Principal Investigator at the Positive Psychology Center and former Senior Research Investigator at the Wharton Neuroscience Initiative; and Michael Platt, Director, the Wharton Neuroscience Initiative; James S. Riepe University Professor, Marketing Department, the Wharton School; and author of *The Leader's Brain* (Wharton School press, 2020). Mironel de Wilde contributed his expertise on the specific meditation exercise.

## ABOUT NANO TOOLS

Nano Tools for Leaders® 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.