

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

LEADING WITH GROUNDED 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.

GOAL

Stay steady under pressure and make better decisions by grounding your actions in values, engaging difficult moments with curiosity, and inviting input that strengthens trust and alignment.

NANO TOOL

In her new book *Strong Ground*, Brené Brown argues that leaders deliver their best work not by projecting certainty, but by staying grounded: engaging with courage, clarity, and compassion even as conditions shift around them. In a series of conversations about the book's core ideas (listen [here](#) and [here](#)), Brown and Wharton organizational psychologist Adam Grant explore how this grounded stance enables leaders to think more clearly, act more effectively, and stay connected to their teams under pressure. Grant extends Brown's framework with insights from his research on curiosity, learning mindsets, and the value of admitting what we don't yet know. Together, they offer a practical path for replacing performative toughness with grounded confidence—helping leaders navigate uncertainty while still delivering for their organizations.



ACTION STEPS

1. Build grounded confidence by defining your top two values and translating them into behaviors (find Brown's list of values [here](#)).

Brown and Grant both emphasize that leaders often feel enormous pressure to *have the answers*—to project certainty, expertise, and control even when situations are ambiguous. This “pressure to know” drives defensiveness and performance posturing. Grounded confidence is the alternative: acting from a clear internal foundation rather than trying to appear infallible.

How to do it:

- **Identify your two core values** (Brown's research suggests that more dilutes clarity). Then write down **two to three specific behaviors** that demonstrate each value. For example: If “courage” is a value, a behavior might be: “*I talk to people, not about them.*”
- **Use your values to steady yourself when you don't have the answers.** Before a conversation or decision, ask: “*Which value matters most here?*” “*What behavior can I choose that keeps me grounded even if I don't have certainty?*” This shifts leaders from performing confidence (“I need to know”) to **practicing grounded confidence** (“I act from what anchors me”). It creates the stability Brown calls “strong back, soft front,” and the learning mindset Grant says is essential for leadership.

2. Replace Armor with Curiosity in Tough Moments.

When conflict or uncertainty hits, Brown notes that leaders tend to “armor up,” becoming defensive, shutting down, or reacting from assumption rather than understanding. One of her core tools for staying open is the *“story I’m telling myself”* script: naming the assumption your brain is making before treating it as fact. Grant complements this with research showing that opening with vulnerability (“I’m unsure how to say this...”) reduces defensiveness and increases trust. Together, they shift leaders from reactivity to inquiry.

How to practice it:

- **Interrupt your assumptions by naming them.** Begin tough conversations in a way that reframes the moment from judgment to curiosity: *“The story I’m telling myself is _____. Is that accurate?”* or *“Help me understand how you’re seeing this.”*
- **Lower defensiveness by acknowledging uncertainty.** Use Grant’s approach: *“I don’t have the full picture yet, but I want to get this right.”* This signals openness rather than armor and invites collaboration.

3. Turn values into visible behaviors—and hold consistent boundaries around them.

Brown emphasizes that values only strengthen a team when they translate into everyday actions; otherwise they remain slogans. Grant adds that cultures shift when leaders model behavioral clarity and enforce it consistently, even when it’s uncomfortable. Strong ground comes from knowing what you stand for—and acting on it with both generosity and limits.

How to do it:

- **Define how each value looks in practice.** Turn abstract principles into specific behaviors (e.g., “We talk to people, not *about* them,” or “We don’t hold meetings after the meeting”).
- **State your boundaries aloud—and uphold them.** Use Brown’s “boundaried generosity”: *“Here’s what I can offer, and here’s what I can’t.”* This prevents overextension while modeling integrity.
- **Apply behavioral expectations consistently.** Address misalignment even when performance is high; otherwise, values lose credibility and the culture becomes unstable.

HOW LEADERS USE IT

Brené Brown shares that her two core values are *faith* and *courage*, and that she uses them to make hard professional decisions, especially when career demands compete with family commitments. Brown is explicit that by faith she means a belief in connection to something larger than herself. Holding that perspective helps her both to tolerate uncertainty and to trust that acting in alignment with her deepest values will ultimately lead where she is meant to go. Courage, in turn, is the willingness to live out that trust, saying no to compelling roles or invitations that would require travel and cause her to miss her children’s events, even when she worries this may disappoint others or make her seem ungrateful. In Brown’s framing, faith provides meaning; courage supplies the resolve to act on it.

Adam Grant routinely begins tough conversations with colleagues and students by saying, *“Here’s my view, but I might be wrong—what am I missing?”* He explains that this simple phrase replaces performative toughness—the pressure to act like the person who already knows—with grounded confidence, the willingness to stay open and steady even without all the answers. Grant reports that this approach invites richer debate, surfaces overlooked information, and leads to better decisions because people feel freer to challenge assumptions and contribute what they see.

In a meeting at her company, Brown's CFO used the "story I'm telling myself" script to address a moment of tension. When a key agenda item was cut for time, she said: *"The story I'm telling myself is that this isn't a priority anymore—is that right?"* Instead of escalating frustration or making assumptions, the question opened space for clarity. Brown confirmed the item was still important and explained the time issue. The exchange restored alignment and strengthened the working relationship, replacing armor with curiosity.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Brené Brown, PhD, MSW, is a research professor at the University of Houston and visiting professor in management at the University of Texas at Austin McCombs School of Business. She is the author of six bestselling books, including *Dare to Lead* and, most recently, *Strong Ground*. **Adam Grant, PhD**, is Wharton's Saul P. Steinberg Professor of Management and a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. He is an expert on organizational behavior and the author of five bestselling books, including *Think Again* and *Hidden Potential*.

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.