

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

MAXIMIZE YOUR UTILITY: CAREER, FAMILY, AND TIME STRATEGIES

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

Prioritize long-term fulfillment by making intentional choices during your most time-squeezed years.

NANO TOOL

Economists define *utility* as a person's overall well-being, capturing the meaning, satisfaction, and long-term fulfillment people derive from how they spend their time. But during high-pressure periods like early parenthood, many women feel compelled to maximize everything at once: career growth, caregiving, household responsibilities, and personal health. But that approach often leads to burnout—and suboptimal long-term outcomes.

Instead, approaching decisions like an economist—through the lens of utility—can help clarify tradeoffs and lead to more strategic allocation of time and energy. The key question becomes: *What choices will contribute most to my long-term fulfillment?* By shifting the goal from doing it all to doing what matters most in each chapter of life, women can make more intentional, sustainable decisions.

The five practices below, drawn from the research and writing of Wharton economist Corinne Low, offer a utility-based approach to navigating the most demanding years of work and life.

ACTION STEPS

- 1. Define Your Utility Function.** Reflect on what a good life looks like for you—not anyone else. Ask: *If money were no object, how would I spend my time?* Use that as a guidepost for evaluating tradeoffs. Your job is a tool that converts time into money. It's important—but not the goal.
- 2. Ruthlessly Prioritize Time.** Say no to “non-promotable” tasks—things that take time but don't advance your goals (like organizing office parties or over-volunteering at school). Use the “Marie Kondo” method for your calendar: eliminate what doesn't serve your long-term values.
- 3. Flip the Script on Outsourcing.** Instead of asking “*Can I afford to outsource this?*” ask “*Should I hire myself for this task?*” If a job can be done more efficiently by someone else, and doing it yourself drains your energy, consider offloading it—just like many men do with tasks like car repair or home maintenance.



4. **Think in Chapters.** You don't have to "have it all" at the same time. Careers—and lives—unfold in chapters. This might be a season of investing more at home. Another chapter might bring a renewed focus on professional growth. Make decisions that work for this chapter, not an idealized one.
5. **Say Yes—Later.** Mentoring, volunteering, planning the retreat—these may all be valuable. But during the squeeze, saying yes to everything means saying no to your own survival. You're not declining forever; you're just turning the page later in the book.

HOW LEADERS CAN USE IT

Managers often lose high-potential talent during the most time-pressured years of employees' lives, particularly when they assume that declining a promotion or stepping back is a sign of reduced ambition. Low's framework encourages a shift in perspective.

Leaders can apply this Nano Tool by:

- Reframing success as long-term, not quarter-by-quarter
- Respecting that not every season is for acceleration, and making room for high performers to re-engage in later chapters
- Supporting boundaries and predictability, especially during early parenting years
- Offering clarity about promotable versus non-promotable tasks, and reducing the burden of non-promotable work on stretched employees
- Recognizing that sustainable careers benefit from flexibility over a life cycle and not just at a single point in time

When leaders acknowledge that working parents (especially women) are optimizing for long-term utility, not just short-term output, they can better support retention, well-being, and high performance over time.

CONTRIBUTOR TO THIS NANO TOOL

Corinne Low, PhD, Associate Professor of Business Economics and Public Policy, The Wharton School

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.