

## NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

# FINDING NEW IDEAS: THE VALUE OF CONNECTING AND RECONNECTING

**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.

**Contributor:** Adam Grant, PhD, management professor, The Wharton School. Grant has been recognized as Wharton's top-rated professor, and is the author of the new book *Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success*.

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### THE GOAL:

Leverage the hidden value in your network by making new connections — and reviving old ones.

### NANO TOOL:

When we're looking for new ideas, we tend to go to our strong ties: the people we know well and trust. But evidence shows that people are actually more likely to innovate and find new jobs through weak ties. Whereas strong ties tend to hold the same knowledge that we do, weak ties offer more efficient access to novel information. Yet it's often difficult to reach out to acquaintances, as we lack the trust and shared perspective necessary to ask for advice.

Groundbreaking research highlights two powerful ways to overcome this challenge. First, it's possible to get the best of both worlds — the trust of strong ties, coupled with the novel information from weak ties. The key is to reactivate dormant ties, the people with whom we've fallen out of touch for three or more years. Studies by researchers Daniel Levin, Jorge Walter, and Keith Murnighan show that it's easier and faster to seek advice from dormant ties than weak ties, as there's a residue of trust built up from past interactions. At the same time, dormant ties provide more novel information than strong ties, as they've encountered new people, ideas, and opportunities in the time since you last connected. In one study, Levin and colleagues demonstrated that leaders and managers received more valuable ideas when they reached out to dormant ties than current ties. In addition, they found that most people have a rich reservoir of dormant ties: after changing jobs, finishing school, or moving to a new region, we lose touch with hundreds of people. The more experience we develop, the broader this pool becomes, and the more useful reconnecting proves.

Second, good ideas often come from combining old ideas from different domains. Instead of reaching out to weak ties, creative sparks can fly when you introduce two of your strong ties who don't know each other, and have distinct expertise. In a study of automotive engineers, for example, researcher David Obstfeld found that engineers were more likely to play a central role in innovation when they had a habit of introducing colleagues who might benefit from knowing each other. Brokering introductions between diverse colleagues can set in motion an exchange of ideas that leads to the creation of new products, services, and processes.

By reconnecting with old ties and making connections between existing strong ties, you can access, develop, and refine ideas that will benefit everyone involved.



## HOW COMPANIES USE IT:

- After Nike Air took the athletic shoe market by storm, Reebok hired Design Continuum to develop a competitive response. Managers worked to make connections between designers with diverse experience. At one meeting, a designer had prior experience working on inflatable splints, and proposed that putting splints in shoes could protect against injuries. A different designer, drawing on a background working with hospital equipment, suggested altering medical IV bags to create a bladder that would allow a splint to fit inside a shoe. As the idea evolved, other designers contributed knowledge about pumps, tubes, and valves to make the product work. The rest was history: as researchers Andrew Hargadon and Beth Bechky sum it up, in its first year alone, “the Reebok Pump shoe accounted for over \$1 billion in revenue in the highly competitive athletic-shoe market and gained wide praise in the business press for its creativity.”
- In 1994, an executive named Tony Audino left Microsoft after seven years in marketing and finance to launch a venture capital firm. Searching for a vehicle that would allow him to stay in touch with his former colleagues, he founded the Microsoft Alumni Network, “partly for altruistic reasons and partly for capitalistic reasons.” Since 1995, many Microsoft alumni have found jobs and filled jobs through the network, which has enabled them to reactivate dormant ties and learn about new opportunities. Alumni groups are becoming increasingly popular vehicles for connecting and reconnecting at a wide range of companies — from Procter & Gamble and Bain & Co. to Nabisco, HP, Ernst & Young, and Texas Instruments.

## ACTION STEPS:

- 1. Make reconnecting with dormant ties a priority.** Put a repeating reminder in your calendar to rekindle an old connection on the first or last day of each month. When the task pops up, identify someone with whom you’ve lost touch — a former roommate or teammate, a past colleague, or an old neighbor. Reach out and set up a time for a meeting or a phone call to share your current projects and find ways to help each other. In addition to using a Rolodex, Facebook, or LinkedIn, new tools such as Brewster and Contactually are designed to help you keep track of your contacts.
- 2. Build an X-team.** Deborah Ancona, a professor at MIT, finds that one of the keys to successful innovation is for teams to manage their external connections. Effective “X-teams” involve three key roles: scouts, ambassadors, and coordinators. Scouts are people who seek out knowledge from outside the team, ambassadors are responsible for gaining political and financial support for the team’s efforts, and coordinators aim to align their efforts with other teams that might be able to contribute. By designating these roles, you can make sure that people don’t miss out on key connections outside their teams.
- 3. Connect people who might benefit from meeting each other.** Develop the habit of sending short notes introducing two people who have common interests and complementary skills, or simply might enjoy each other’s company. In the message, offer a sentence on what you appreciate about each person, and another sentence about why you think they should connect. Then, get out of the way and let them figure out how they can be helpful to each other.
- 4. Assess your reciprocity style.** People tend to approach connecting and reconnecting with one of three styles: taker, giver, and matcher. When making an introduction or reaching out to a dormant tie, takers focus on what they can gain from others, givers look for ways to contribute to others, and matchers aim to trade value evenly. To identify your style and understand the relative benefits of each approach, you can take a free self-assessment and 360-feedback assessment at [www.giveandtake.com](http://www.giveandtake.com).

## SHARE YOUR BEST PRACTICES:

Do you have a best practice for accessing hidden ideas in networks? If so, please share it on our blog at Wharton's Center for Leadership and Change Management. <http://whartonleadership.wordpress.com/>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- *Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success*. Adam Grant (Viking, 2013). Examines the surprising role of interaction styles in success, and shows what effective networking, collaboration, talent management, influence, and negotiation skills have in common.
- "The Power of Reconnection: How Dormant Ties Can Surprise You," Daniel Z. Levin, Jorge Walter, and J. Keith Murnighan, *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Spring 2011. Shows why reactivating old connections is worthwhile and efficient for gaining advice and ideas.
- "How to Build Your Network," Brian Uzzi and Shannon Dunlap, *Harvard Business Review*, December 2005. Identifies strategies for evaluating and expanding networks to access novel information, diverse skill sets, and influence.
- "Leading in a Connected World: How Effective Leaders Drive Results Through Networks," Robb Cross, Amanda Cowen, Lisa Vertucci, and Robert J. Thomas, *Organizational Dynamics*, 2009. Explores how leaders who excel over time manage the center, leverage the periphery, bridge collaborative silos, engage the best expertise, and minimize insularity.

Adam Grant teaches in Wharton's [Advanced Management Program](#), and has been named one of BusinessWeek's favorite professors and one of the world's top 40 business professors under 40.

## 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, Wharton Professor of Management Michael Useem, Director. Nano Tools Academic Director, Professor Adam Grant.