

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

OPTIMIZE YOUR BRAIN FOR SUCCESS: REDUCING EXCESS AND NEGATIVE NOISE

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: Shawn Achor, expert on the connection between happiness and success; author of the best-selling *The Happiness Advantage* and *Before Happiness*, Wharton AMP presenter

THE GOAL:

Accelerate the achievement of your goals by reducing your exposure to negative noise.

NANO TOOL:

According to Timothy Wilson, professor of psychology at the University of Virginia,¹ the human brain receives 11 million bits of information per second from the environment, but can only process 40 bits per second. This means it has to choose what tiny percentage of this input to process and attend to, and what huge chunk to dismiss or ignore. Now research can help you train your brain to notice more of the positive signals around you — and this is key, because the better your brain is at using its energy to focus on the positive, the greater your chances of achieving your goals.

One of the best ways to increase positive focus is to consciously block out some of the negative noise in those 11 million pieces of information. It's not easy — our brains are hard-wired to pay more attention to threats in our environment — but there are criteria you can use to distinguish between the “signal” (information that you should pay attention to) and the noise. Some noise is simply distracting: neutral or even positive signals that don't relate directly to achieving your goals. But noise that is negative can be even more harmful by diminishing your positive focus. And keep in mind that some of that negative noise is generated by you: internal voices that express doubt, fear, worry, and anxiety are just as toxic as external negative noise.

Pioneering research in positive psychology and neuroscience has found that by consciously decreasing noise — both negative internal thoughts and excess external information — by just five percent you can substantially improve your chances of finding that positive signal. And other multiple studies cited in *The Happiness Advantage* show that picking up on positive signals can help you make better decisions, be three times more creative, generate 37% more sales, improve your health, increase your productivity by 31%, be ten times more engaged and 40% more likely to get a promotion. By using any or all of three strategies or action steps, outlined below, you can begin to cancel negative or distracting noise and boost the signals that can bring you a major competitive advantage.



HOW LEADERS USE IT:

- Leaders, like Chade-Meng Tan at Google, encourage employees to create a practice of quieting the brain through meditation to help cancel the excess noise of a multi-tasking and overstimulating working world.
- Top financial advisors at UBS, like at many companies, encourage investors to not follow the hourly and daily ups and downs of the market. Negative noise caused by obsessive checking of stocks leads to poor future financial decisions.
- The Mayo Clinic has tested decreasing unnecessary noise in hospitals to improve patient care and health outcomes.

ACTION STEPS:

Reducing negative and excess noise allows you to focus on and create a positive reality, one in which you can imagine and attain positive results in work and life. Here are several ways you can help activate these three strategies:

- **Recognize the signal.** In the working world, noise can be particularly dangerous. Paying too much attention to it comes at the direct expense of the valuable information that will help you spot opportunities and solutions in your environment. You need to boost your *signal-to-noise ratio*.
Use these four criteria to determine what's signal and what's noise. If information fits even one of the categories, it's almost certainly noise:
 - *Unusable:* If the information won't spur you to change your behavior, it is extraneous. Most of the information your brain receives fits in this category. That news story about an earthquake in Burma? Unless you plan to do something to help the victims, it's noise.
 - *Untimely:* you are not going to use the information imminently and it could change by the time you do use it. If you bought stocks to hold for the long run, don't check the NASDAQ every day.
 - *Hypothetical:* it is based on what someone else believes "could be" instead of "what is." Most 5-day weather forecasts and market predictions fall into this category. Even weather forecasts for the next day are only 53 percent accurate.
 - *Distracting:* it distracts you from your goals. Does the flood of information relate to your career or personal goals? If not, it's keeping you from achieving them.
- **Avoid excess external noise.** Cut down on your noise consumption by five percent, allowing your brain to focus on more important, relevant information. Here are 7 easy ways :
 - Leave the car radio off for the first five minutes of your drive.
 - Turn off the car radio when talking to someone.
 - Mute TV and Internet commercials.
 - Remove news media links from your bookmark tool bar.
 - Limit of the time you watch prediction news ("experts" trying to predict what will happen in politics or the markets).
 - Do not read about or listen to coverage of tragedies that you cannot or will not affect with your behavior.
 - When working, listen to music without lyrics.

- **Cancel the negative internal noise.** Negative thinking is the most dangerous type of noise because it not only impairs our ability to hear the positive signal but undermines all our other efforts to create positive change. Researchers at the University of Chicago found that writing down five things you feel positively about can significantly lower levels of worry and pessimism. To tune in to the positive even further, focus your writing on 5 positive aspects of achieving a specific goal.

SHARE YOUR BEST PRACTICES:

Do you have a best practice for blocking out excess or negative noise? If so, please share it on our blog at Wharton's Center for Leadership and Change Management. <http://whartonleadership.wordpress.com/>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- *Before Happiness: The Five Hidden Keys to Achieving Success, Spreading Happiness, and Sustaining Positive Change*, Shawn Achor (Crown Business, 2013). Explains how our perception of the world predicts our ability to change our success, happiness, and health, and offers five strategies for increasing the ability to create positive, successful realities.
- *The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology that Fuel Success and Performance at Work*, Shawn Achor (Crown Business, 2010). Provides seven actionable principles, as taught in Harvard's Happiness course and to companies worldwide, for improving performance and maximizing potential by becoming happier.
- *Authentic Happiness Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*, Martin Seligman (Atria Books, 2004). Explains that trying to fix weaknesses won't help to achieve happiness; incorporating strengths such as humor, originality, and generosity into everyday interactions with people is more effective. Includes practical tools such as self-tests and exercises.
- "The Benefits of Frequent Positive Affect: Does Happiness Lead to Success?" Sonja Lyubomirsky, Laura King, Ed Diener, *Psychological Bulletin*, 131 (2005), 803-855. Argues that the happiness-success link exists not only because success makes people happy, but also because positive affect engenders success. Reveals evidence that suggests that positive affect — the hallmark of well-being — may be the cause of many of the desirable characteristics, resources, and successes correlated with happiness.
- *The Signal and the Noise*, Nate Silver. (Penguin Group, 2012). This book does an excellent job explaining in depth the way that noise can confuse the signal and distort decision making, especially in economics and politics.
- Shawn Achor teaches in Wharton's [Advanced Management Program](#)

¹*Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Belknap Press, 2004).

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 is John Paul MacDuffie, Wharton Associate Professor of Management, and Director of the Program on Vehicle and Mobility Innovation (PVMI) at Wharton's Mack Institute for Innovation Management.