

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

LEAD LIKE A GUIDE: ADOPT THE STRENGTHS OF MOUNTAINEERS

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.

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THE GOAL:

Lead your team to new heights using the key strengths of world-class mountain guides.

NANO TOOL:

As harsh conditions and lofty goals become even more commonplace in the business world, leaders often call on metaphors from mountaineering to inspire employees and boost organizational performance. Setting a common goal, building effective teams, determining a route, overcoming adversity — all are essential components of both mountaineering and business.

Leaders can go beyond the metaphors, though. New research shows that world-class mountain guides demonstrate six key leadership strengths that help their charges reach for the highest peaks, and that these same strengths have a significant impact when applied within organizations. Business leaders who lead like a guide will provide the kind of leadership that supports the vision of the organization and uplifts the people who work to make that vision a reality.

ACTION STEPS:

- 1. Make authentic connections, building positive relationships with those on your team.** UCLA psychology professor Shelly Gable suggests that telling others about positive events can foster positive social interactions — *as long as the listener's response recognizes and validates the good news*. Active and constructive responses like, "Your project came in on time and under budget! That's great, tell me more about it," are associated with emotional well-being and better relationship quality.
- 2. Adapt your leadership style to the situation.** World-class mountain guides know that being able to switch leadership styles as they move from safe to more risky territory is critically important. The findings of Wharton management professor Adam Grant and his co-authors reveal that choice of leadership style in the workplace can enhance or inhibit team performance depending on the level of proactivity of team members. Their study confirms that the best outcomes are achieved when more passive followers have extraverted leaders, and when more proactive followers have introverted leaders. How could you adapt your leadership approach to match the needs of your team?



- 3. Empower your team.** Mountain guides know that empowered teams are more likely to reach the summit quickly and safely. A study by management professor Natalia Lorinkova and her co-authors reveals that although business teams participating in an experiment led by directive leaders started performing well more quickly than teams given more freedom and opportunity for input, their performance plateaued as the experiment progressed. Empowered teams, on the other hand, improved over time, eventually outstripping the performance of the directed group. The improved performance of the empowered teams was attributed in part to enhanced opportunities for team learning, behavioral coordination, and the development of collective knowledge structures.
- 4. Build trust.** In mountain climbing, the team is often physically linked together with ropes. In business, leaders need to find other ways to create the same sense of interconnectedness. Try employing what Northeastern University psychology professor David DeSteno calls “the perception of similarity” to create emotional links. “If you can make someone feel a link with you,” DeSteno says, “his empathy for and willingness to cooperate with you will increase.”
- 5. Develop a checklist.** Used by those who operate under high-risk conditions, including mountain guides, airline pilots and combat commanders, checklists help ensure no detail is neglected. Wharton management professor Mike Useem developed one to help business leaders under pressure make effective decisions. Among his mission-critical principles: express confidence in and support for those you lead, communicate persuasively, and emphasize the group’s common purpose.
- 6. Be a big-picture thinker.** Mountain guides find multiple ways to keep the ultimate goal in mind — reaching the summit. In change management efforts, try these ideas from Wharton adjunct professor Greg Shea:
 - Look far enough into the future to uncouple yourself from the constraints of the present and describe the end goal — the big picture.
 - Enhance your creative thinking by starting at a specific future moment and working back to the present to determine unique ways to reach your goals.
 - Design a bold change initiative that encourages you and your team to think system-wide, try new approaches, and develop new solutions.

HOW LEADERS USE IT:

- Mansi Jain, an analyst with McKinsey & Company, says her expert guide in Patagonia was able to adopt different leadership styles while always aiming to lead by example. Back home, while working on a project with a bank, her clients were wary of her credibility and experience but needed direction and effective execution. She first employed an authoritative leadership style, proactively steering key discussions, and giving research-based opinions. Toward the end, needing to ensure that the clients had the capabilities to have sustainable impact, she appointed others to lead training sessions, and pushed the clients for their opinions before offering hers. The clients were ultimately able to roll out and sustain high-impact changes.
- Edmund Reese, VP and CFO, U.S. Consumer Card Products at American Express, who climbed the Grand Teton as a member of a guide-led team, says, “Having leadership responsibility for over two thousand people, I’ve learned that to achieve our objectives and enjoy the work on the way to success, I must take the first big step. Generating confidence in the workplace to ensure that members know that success is attainable and there will likely be a solution for challenges to come has been an important focus. After the strategy is set, delegate authority and stay close to those most directly engaged with the work. If we build leadership in others, we develop a stronger line and an overall stronger organization.”

- Deborah Garber, a category manager at Microsoft who was a member of a guided trekking team in South America, says, “When I realized that I wasn’t passionate about reaching for the same [goal] any longer, I found a manager at work who could see the big picture and who put me on the path for my next adventure. He helped me figure out that I wanted to investigate a totally new function in my next job, and introduced me to four other leaders across the company. One of those introductions led to a new job that has turned into a dream role and has helped me progress more quickly in my career than I thought possible.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- “[To Be a Better Leader, Lead Like a Guide](#),” Chris Maxwell. *European Business Review* (September-October): 67-70, 2014. Describes research findings that reveal six key strengths of mountain guides and their application to business environments. Maxwell’s book *Lead Like a Guide: How World-Class Mountain Guides Inspire Us to Be Better Leaders* will be published by Praeger in 2016.
- “Stop Stealing the Spotlight: The Perils of Extraverted Leadership,” Adam Grant, Francesca Gino, and David Hofmann. *European Business Review* (May-June): 29-31, 2011. Offers prescriptions for extraverted leaders and their organizations.
- *The Leader’s Checklist: Expanded Edition. 15 Mission-Critical Principles*, Michael Useem (Wharton Digital Press, 2011). Offers a checklist of leadership principles based on research and observation of managers in large organizations.

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 Professor John Paul MacDuffie, Professor of Management at the Wharton School and Director of the Program on Vehicle and Mobility Innovation (PVMII) at Wharton’s Mack Institute for Innovation Management.