

## NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

# EVERYONE IS AN INNOVATOR: BUILDING A CULTURE OF NON-CONFORMITY, PART 1

**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.

**Contributors:** Adam Grant, PhD, The Class of 1965 Professor of Management and Psychology, The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania; and author of the New York Times bestsellers *Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World* and *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives our Success*.

### THE GOAL:

Improve innovation and diversity by encouraging everyone on your team to think outside the box.

### NANOTOOL:

Many managers mistakenly believe that to fuel and sustain innovation, they need to rely on outside hires, assuming that new ideas and approaches come only from a subset of uniquely creative individuals. In fact, there's evidence that under the right conditions, a wide range of rank and file employees can be a continuous source of new ideas.

Encouraging originality not only drives innovation; it works against the inevitable stagnation that occurs when everyone thinks in similar ways. Giving employees opportunities and incentives to think outside the box helps the entire organization become more nimble in today's volatile business environment.

Here are four suggestions for encouraging original thinking.

### ACTION STEPS:

- 1. Generate a lot of ideas.** Volume improves the odds of finding great ideas. It's true for people across all fields and industries, from inventors to musicians. The greater the output, the more original and even ground-breaking some of it will be. How much is enough? Most executives surveyed believe about 20 ideas is a good goal. But evidence shows more than ten times that amount is even better. By using one or more of the following steps, you can encourage employees to generate quantity and variety without sacrificing focus and productivity.
- 2. Play offense.** Instead of continuously trying to keep your competition at bay, put people on the offense. To generate more ideas, ask them to consider ways to put your company out of business. By imagining themselves as competitors, they will break free of a risk-averse, defensive mindset and spot new opportunities for innovation.
- 3. Encourage the individual.** Group settings are not typically the place where employees will share their most unusual suggestions. Decades of research shows that people working alone will come up with higher quantity and quality of ideas. You can ask individuals to "brainwrite" and contribute their ideas before meeting with a group, or schedule rapid one-on-one meetings in which you encourage employees to share their ideas with you directly.



- 4. Revive the suggestion box.** They're often seen as a thing of the past, but evidence suggests that suggestion boxes can be surprisingly useful for generating ideas. Combining the power of steps 1 and 3, they make it easy for a large number of individuals from anywhere in the organization to contribute a diverse set of ideas. (In Part 2 of this Nano Tool we'll consider different systems for culling these contributions and rewarding and pursuing the best ones.)

## HOW LEADERS USE IT:

- A Dutch steel company that's now part of Tata Steel brought in a large number of ideas by running a suggestion program for 70 years. Its 11,000 employees generated between 7,000 and 12,000 suggestions a year. A typical employee made six or seven suggestions and saw three or four adopted. In one year alone those adopted improvements saved the company more than \$750,000.
- At Hewlett-Packard Norway, managing director Anita Krohn Traaseth implemented a "speed date the boss" program. Employees were invited to meet with her for five minutes and answer: who are you and what do you do at HP? Where do you think we should change, and what should we keep focusing on? What do you want to contribute beyond fulfilling your job responsibilities? The program was so successful at identifying good ideas that other HP leaders adopted it in Austria and Switzerland.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- *Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World*, Adam Grant (Viking, 2016). Explores how leaders can fight groupthink to build cultures of non-conformity that welcome dissent; and how to recognize a good idea, speak up without getting silenced, build a coalition of allies, choose the right time to act, and manage fear and doubt.
- Test your originality. For a free 5-minute assessment of your originality, visit [www.adamgrant.net](http://www.adamgrant.net). Think you know what it takes to be original? This 15-question quiz and the evidence from Adam Grant's research may surprise you.
- *Weird Ideas that Work: 11½ Practices for Promoting, Managing, and Sustaining Innovation*, Robert I. Sutton (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001). Draws on extensive research in behavioral psychology to explain how innovation can be fostered in hiring, managing, and motivating people; building teams; making decisions; and interacting with outsiders.
- *Crazy Is a Compliment: The Power of Zigging When Everyone Else Zags*, Linda Rottenberg (Penguin, 2009). Combines inspiring stories, original research, and practical advice to create a road map for entrepreneurial thinkers to get started and grow bigger.

Read Part 2 of [\*Everyone Is an Innovator: Building a Culture of Non-conformity\*](#).

## 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 (PVMI) at Wharton's Mack Institute for Innovation Management.