

## NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

# EVERYONE IS AN INNOVATOR: BUILDING A CULTURE OF NON-CONFORMITY, PART 2

**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:

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

### NANO TOOL:

Part 1 of this Nano Tool offered four steps for encouraging original thinking from your employees. Once the ideas start rolling in, though, how do you sort through them and select the best ones? And how do you maintain a “culture of non-conformity” over time? Here are five ways to both develop a rigorous process for assessment and encourage employees to keep the ideas coming.

### ACTION STEPS:

- 1. Tap your innovators.** Because ability levels vary when it comes to spotting innovative ideas with the greatest potential, not every vote is equal. Studies suggest that you should look to fellow innovators, who will give candid, unbiased feedback and are more likely to entertain unconventional ideas. Consider holding an innovation tournament (find directions in [this Nano Tool](#)) that is judged by original thinkers, or allow them to create their own vetting process.
- 2. Rank-order your values.** To keep original thinking flowing, make sure employees know which company values are more important than others. Studies show that if they're not sure about your priorities, performance will suffer. Does safety matter more than customer satisfaction? Is growth more important than collaboration? Make your priorities clear — and to help reinforce non-conformity, allow new employees to question them.
- 3. Gather the right information.** Not everyone in an organization has access to the same information, so it makes sense to seek input on problems (not just solutions) from a diverse group. You encourage inquiry by not expecting quick answers and by taking the time to learn about an issue from a variety of perspectives. This approach can ultimately improve solutions because they'll be based on a more thorough analysis of the problem.



- 4. Seek out true dissenters.** Instead of assigning devil's advocates, unearth them. Research reveals that assigned devil's advocates don't take the role seriously enough and aren't taken seriously by their audiences. To get useful dissent, find someone who genuinely holds a contrary opinion. Groups with true dissenters, whose opinions are well-regarded, have been shown to reach better solutions.
- 5. Be open to challenges.** Managers who get defensive in response to negative feedback send a clear message: keep your opinions to yourself if you don't want trouble. Instead, ask people to confront you in public — and be receptive to their views. You can also model the critical, honest feedback you're seeking by bringing up your own weaknesses. It can make people feel comfortable disagreeing with you, and open the door to their sharing their opinions in the future.

## HOW LEADERS USE IT:

- Dow Chemical holds an innovation tournament each year seeking ideas for reducing waste and cutting back on energy use. Parameters include cost (an initial investment of \$200,000 or less) and performance (the investment must be recouped within a year). Wharton professors Christian Terweisch and Karl Ulrich report that the 575 initiatives green-lighted in a decade saved the company \$110 million annually.
- The digital music company Spotify has new teams organize around solving long-term business problems instead of working on projects. CTO Oskar Stål says teams can work on a problem for at least a year. "If they were easy to solve, we would have solved them already," he says.
- Tom Gerrity, former CEO of software company Index Group, had a consultant give him negative feedback in front of his entire staff. His receptivity to criticism made everyone else more inclined to speak up and modeled the behavior he wanted from his managers.

## 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.
- ["Why Some Innovation Tournaments Succeed While Others Fail,"](#) *Knowledge@Wharton*, February 20, 2014. Discusses situations in which tournaments aren't appropriate, and suggests alternatives.
- ["The Weird Rules of Creativity,"](#) Robert Sutton, *Harvard Business Review*, September 2001. Provides research-based, often counter-intuitive ideas for managers seeking to build a more innovative workforce.

Read Part 1 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.