

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

THE POWER OF AWE: PUTTING ITS BENEFITS TO WORK

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:

Put the benefits of awe experiences to work for yourself and your team.

NANO TOOL:

What if you could encourage better decision-making, generosity, and cooperation in your organization? What if people were eager to learn more and increase their interest in improving business processes and outcomes? According to a great deal of recent research, these are some of the benefits of experiencing awe: a strong emotional response to encounters such as viewing dramatic landscapes, witnessing storms, observing inspiring architecture, listening to music, or having a religious experience. A new Berkeley study reveals that awe can even improve physical and mental health, possibly even lowering the risk of type 2 diabetes, clinical depression, heart disease, and arthritis — benefits similar to those enjoyed by eating right and exercising. As Berkeley psychology professor Dacher Keltner puts it, “Don’t underestimate the power of goosebumps.”

While awe is most commonly thought of in terms of a response to natural wonders (think mountains, waterfalls, and canyons), you don’t have to travel far to experience it. In fact, you can induce feelings of awe quickly and easily in the workplace — and reap its benefits — without putting on hiking shoes or purchasing plane tickets (although those are worthwhile options). Consider the following four action steps and begin incorporating “awe interventions” in your workplace.

ACTION STEPS:

These steps provide ideas both large and small for inspiring awe in yourself and your team. Keltner says building in “mini awe interventions” during the day is key.

- Make your workspace more aesthetically pleasing. Simple changes such as replacing your computer’s desktop image with a photo of a beautiful place you’ve visited, your child or partner, or an inspiring leader can work. Integrating nature can be done on a large scale (such as Silicon Valley’s vertical gardens or “living walls”) or a small one (adding potted plants). A study published in the journal *HortScience* reveals a number of psychosocial benefits afforded by plants in the workplace.
- Take “awe walks” whether your work setting is urban or rural; indoor spaces can work too (think museums, cathedrals, or aquariums). Directions for 15-minute walks in natural, indoor, and urban settings are found [here](#).



- Write and read about awe. Research published in the journal *Psychological Science* found that some of the benefits of awe, including reduced impatience and increased prosocial behaviors, could be elicited by asking experiment subjects to write about a personal experience that caused them to feel awe and by reading about the awe-inspiring experiences of others. In your workplace, incorporate testimonial stories of inspirational leaders, share your own experiences of awe, and encourage team members to do the same. Bookmark online stories of awe and set reminders to read them at least once a day. [Sidetracked Magazine](#) is a good place to start.
- University of Pennsylvania psychologists David B. Yaden, Jonathan Ivry, and Johannes C. Eichstaedt and co-authors say that astronauts interviewed after space flights reported self-transcendent experiences after viewing Earth from space, returning with an expanded sense of perspective on their lives, an increased sense of connection to others, and a renewed sense of purpose. For the Earth-bound, research suggests that viewing awe-inspiring videos may have a similar effect. Check the University of California Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center videos [here](#).

HOW LEADERS USE IT:

- Facebook has constructed a nine-acre green roof at its new Menlo Park facility, complete with a winding half-mile walking path. Lori Goler, head of HR and recruiting at Facebook, says the green space gives us "space to think." To underscore the value of these experiences, researchers have documented the pro-social effects of even just one minute of looking up into tall trees.
- Business titans like Elon Musk (Tesla and SpaceX) and Jeff Bezos (Amazon and Blue Origin) know the importance of awe in inspiring others and garnering attention through space flight. SpaceX ventures, with future plans to colonize Mars, are frequently described as "breathtaking" and "awe-inspiring." Bezos, who displays Apollo flight suits and other memorabilia inside the Blue Origin facility, says, "I want millions of people living and working in space."
- Arousing a sense of awe is important if you want your message to reach as many people as possible. Wharton professors Jonah Berger and Katherine Milkman examined the content on the *New York Times'* homepage that is most widely shared. Their findings: content that makes viewers or readers feel awe or wonder is more likely to be shared than content that makes people feel sad or angry.
- Google's Tel Aviv office has an indoor (faux) orange grove in a collaborative workspace that also includes picnic tables and a cobblestone-like floor. HubSpot used wallpaper mimicking the outdoors, including forests and clouds, in its Cambridge, Massachusetts offices. San Francisco software company Zendesk has a two-story moss-covered wall, and Goodyear's global headquarters in East Akron, Ohio boasts two vertical gardens.
- IDEO design director Ingrid Fetell Lee says that cultivating more awe at work involves creating a shift in perspective, using light, colors, and textures. She suggests that awe-inspiring spaces, often relegated to the front lobby, need to be brought into the workspace. Lee says, "Having a space for awe to break you out of your execution-oriented mindset could be an asset."
- Do you have an example of awe in the workplace? Share it with us [here](#).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- "Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion," Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, *Cognition and Emotion* 17, No. 2 (2003). Provides a review of what has been written about awe outside the field of psychology, noting that while fleeting and rare, experiences of awe can change the course of a life in profound and permanent ways.

- “Awe Expands People’s Perception of Time, Alters Decision Making, and Enhances Well-Being,” Melanie Rudd, Kathleen D. Vohs, and Jennifer Aaker, *Psychological Science* 23, No. 10 (2012). Describes the results of experiments showing that experiencing awe leads to feelings of having more available time, less impatience, and greater life satisfaction.
- “Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior,” Paul K. Piff et al., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 108, No. 6 (2015). Reveals the results of four studies indicating that feelings of awe may result in a diminishment of the individual self and its concerns, increasing ethical decision-making, generosity, and prosocial values.

ABOUT NANO TOOLS:

Nano Tools for Leaders[®] was conceived and developed by Deb Giffen, MCC, director of Custom Programs at Wharton Executive Education. Nano Tools for Leaders[®] is a collaboration between joint sponsors Wharton Executive Education and Wharton’s Center for Leadership and Change Management. This collaboration is led by Professors Michael Useem and John Paul MacDuffie.