

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

HOW TO MAKE A TEAM SMARTER

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.

THE GOAL

Surface and leverage the collective intelligence of your team with the right leadership practices, team processes, and systems.

NANO TOOL

Putting people together in a group doesn't automatically make them a team. Neither does convening a group of individual experts and giving them a problem to solve. Research reveals that the smartest teams aren't composed of the smartest individuals. The best teams are aligned around a common goal, evaluated on a collective outcome, organized around a unique role for each member, and motivated to share their knowledge and coach each other regularly.

Every team has hidden potential. Sometimes people's strengths aren't recognized; other times their voices aren't heard. Unlocking the hidden potential in groups requires leadership practices, team processes, and systems that harness the capabilities and contributions of all their members.

ACTION STEPS

- 1. Choose the right leader.** Leaders have the authority to transform a group of individuals into a team—but we rarely choose the person with the strongest leadership skills, instead going for the most talkative person (researchers call it the Babble Effect). Mistaking confidence for competence and quantity for quality means that team cohesion and performance suffer. Collective intelligence is maximized when leaders put their mission above their ego. Their goal isn't to be the smartest person in the room but rather to make the room smarter. They make sure every voice is heard. When someone points out a problem, instead of shooting the messenger, they reward the messenger.
- 2. Use brainwriting rather than brainstorming.** For more than half a century, brainstorming has been the go-to method for teams to surface new ideas. But there's ample evidence that shows it rarely works well. Research shows that individuals working separately tend to generate more creative ideas than groups brainstorming together. Good ideas get lost due to pressure to conform, fear of looking foolish, and the difficulty of breaking through the noise. A more effective option is brainwriting: team members come up with ideas on their own, share them anonymously with the group, and evaluate them separately before the whole team chooses the most promising ones. Collective intelligence requires individual creativity and group wisdom.
- 3. Create a lattice hierarchy rather than a ladder.** Most organizational hierarchies are set up to reject unproven ideas. They give one person the power to shut down suggestions. Conversely, a lattice system uses an organizational chart with channels across levels and between teams, which provides many possible paths to the top. Different from a matrix,



which puts a number of different bosses or managers above you who can hold you back and shoot you down, its goal is to give you multiple leaders who are willing and able to help move you forward and lift you up.

HOW LEADERS USE IT

The story of the 2010 Chilean mine collapse that trapped 33 men behind 700,000 tons of rock is well known. But what's often missing from the story is the \$10 device invented by a small-time entrepreneur that allowed contact with the miners—and the 24-year-old engineer whose suggestions enabled the rescue. Team leader André Sougarret was selected because of his “exceptional ability to listen and reach conclusions after listening to all sides.” He knew that considering ideas from a range of people was key to success because there was no one “super leader who had all the answers.” He set up a brainwriting process, gathering ideas from around the world via a website and enlisting a team to vet the submissions. And he created a lattice system that allowed a young engineer delivering drilling equipment to come directly to him with an unconventional idea for accessing the miners.

CONTRIBUTOR TO THIS NANO TOOL

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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.