NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

THE LEADERSHIP CHECKLIST

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.

Contributor: Michael Useem, William and Jacalyn Egan Professor of Management and Director of the Wharton Center for Leadership and Change Management, The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania; author, *The Leader's Checklist.*

THE GOAL:

Create and apply a complete list of vital leadership actions.

NANO TOOL:

The absence of an action checklist is one of most correctable lapses in leadership. Through the simple step of creating and consistently applying the equivalent of a pilot's or surgeon's checklist, a leader is readied for whatever may be in store.

Albert Einstein once described the calling of modern physics as an effort to make the physical universe as simple as possible — but not simpler. The leader's checklist is likewise at its best when it is as bare-bones as possible — but not more so. Just 15 mission-critical principles can define its core for most leaders, and the principles vary surprisingly little among companies or countries.

HOW COMPANIES USE IT:

No two leadership positions are exactly the same, nor do any two sets of circumstances require the identical exercise of leadership. While the 15 principles constitute a kind of "true north" for every manager, each leader's checklist must also be customized for one's personal place:

- A checklist for a major professional services firm identified nearly a dozen special capacities that it held to be vital for its managers, including seeing the world through clients' eyes, enthusiastically engaging with clients, and working with them to transcend conventional thinking.

- The leader's principles for General Electric include making tough personnel decisions and continually innovating, while the principles for Google place special emphasis on pursuing creative sparks and guiding others.

- The New York Fire Department provides 13 checklists for officers responsible for major incidents, including a "Mayday Checklist" that requires ordering all unrelated two-way radio traffic to cease, establishing a staging area, and enlisting chaplains as needed.

- Two Microsoft sales managers created a pre-sales checklist, asking before a sales call that their representatives Google all who are expected at the meeting and submit their two-minute opening pitch to memory.

ACTION STEPS:

A leader's checklist is only as good as the materials and engineering that go into it. Drawing on an array of researchers, observers, and practitioners, and from witnessing a variety of leaders in action, here are 15 tried and tested principles for any leader's checklist:

1. **Articulate a Vision.** Formulate a clear and persuasive vision and communicate it to all members of the enterprise.

2. **Think and Act Strategically.** Set forth a pragmatic strategy for achieving that vision both short- and long-term, and ensure that it is widely understood; consider all the players, and anticipate reactions and resistance before they are manifest.

3. **Honor the Room.** Frequently express your confidence in and support for those who work with and for you.

4. **Take Charge.** Embrace a bias for action, of taking responsibility even if it is not formally delegated, particularly if you are well positioned to make a difference.

5. **Act Decisively.** Make good and timely decisions, and ensure that they are executed.

6. **Communicate Persuasively.** Communicate in ways that people will not forget; simplicity and clarity of expression help.

7. **Motivate the Troops.** Appreciate the distinctive intentions that people bring, and then build on those diverse motives to draw the best from each.

8. **Embrace the Front Lines.** Delegate authority except for strategic decisions, and stay close to those most directly engaged with the work of the enterprise.

9. **Build Leadership in Others.** Develop leadership throughout the organization.

10. **Manage Relations.** Build enduring personal ties with those who look to you, and work to harness the feelings and passions of the workplace.

11. **Identify Personal Implications.** Help everybody appreciate the impact that the vision and strategy are likely to have on their own work and future with the firm.

12. **Convey Your Character.** Through gesture, commentary, and accounts, ensure that others appreciate that you are a person of integrity.

13. **Dampen Over-Optimism. Counter the hubris of success, focus attention on latent threats and unresolved problems, and protect against the tendency for managers to engage in unwarranted risk.**

14. **Build a Diverse Top Team.** Leaders need to take final responsibility, but leadership is also a team sport best played with an able roster of those collectively capable of resolving all the key challenges.

15. **Place Common Interest First.** In setting strategy, communicating vision, and reaching decisions, common purpose comes first, personal self-interest last.

SHARE YOUR BEST PRACTICES:

Do you have a set of guiding principles that could constitute a leader's checklist? If so, please share it on our blog at Wharton's Center for Leadership and Change Management. http://whartonleadership.wordpress.com/

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- Atul Gawande, *The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right,* Holt, 2009. Examines checklists as used in various professions, observing that no matter how talented or successful an individual may be, a well-designed checklist will prevent errors and improve outcomes.

- Adam Bryant, *The Corner Office: Indispensible and Unexpected Lessons from CEOs on How to Lead and Succeed,* Times Books, 2011. Shares leadership insights and lessons from over 70 CEOs.

- Mukul Pandya, Robbie Shell, and *Nightly Business Report, Lasting Leadership: What You Can Learn from the Top 25 Business People of Our Times,* Wharton School Publishing and Pearson Education, 2004. Identifies eight attributes of leadership and explores the observations of some of the most successful leaders of the last 25 years.

- Michael Useem, *The Leader's Checklist: 15 Mission-Critical Principles* (Wharton Digital Press, 2011). Helps leaders develop their ability to make good and timely decisions in unpredictable and stressful environments.

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, Professor Adam Grant.