NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

THE STAR MODEL: CLOSE THE SAYING-DOING GAP TO BUILD A HIGH-PERFORMING TEAM

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:

Transform team goals from talk into action by applying the four-step STAR model.

NANO TOOL:

American philosopher Will Durant famously paraphrased Aristotle, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." Ample research shows that this observation applies to individual as well as team efforts. High-performing teams (HPTs) promote habits — repeatable, consistent behaviors — that produce excellent results.

Team performance begins with well-defined goals. But goals are just a start, since by themselves they are often little more than lofty-sounding words. HPTs close the gap between words and action — what we call the "saying-doing gap" — by creating habits that encourage effective action.

The STAR model describes four steps that help leaders and their teams develop and maintain a painstaking focus on small, repeatable actions that produce a practical culture of success. Team leaders need not be charismatic visionaries. Teams do best when they focus on seemingly insignificant, observable habits that operationalize shared goals and values.

Our research has shown that HPTs create a culture of success by acting like "STAR"s. To be a STAR, you should:

- Target **S**pecific objectives
- **T**ake small steps toward achieving those objectives
- **A**lter the environment to facilitate taking action
- Cultivate a **R**ealistic optimism about the challenges of implementing new behaviors

ACTION STEPS:

1. **Target Specific objectives:** The key to successfully making a change or improvement is to identify highly specific objectives. For example, instead of saying to a teammate, "I want you to listen to me," try, "The next time we have a conversation, I want you to wait three seconds before you respond to me and restate my point before you make another one." The second statement defines what you mean by "listening," while the first is way too abstract.

2. **<u>T</u>ake small steps:** Under the best of circumstances, it is hard to adopt new behaviors. To make it easier, break down the process into small steps. Imagine a teammate needed to get more comfortable with making presentations. As a small step, you could suggest starting with delivering part of presentation to a small group and building up to giving one completely alone to a larger audience.

3. **<u>A</u>lter the environment:** Make changes that remove barriers to acting differently and that encourage the right behaviors. You might consider altering the environment by giving each of your teammates an "accountability buddy." Committed to being supportive, a buddy helps his or her partner stay on track toward targeted objectives. Bottom line: new behaviors should be an easy choice, not an uphill battle.

4. **Be a <u>R</u>ealistic optimist:** Everybody knows about the power of positive thinking, but it turns out that what many people believe can be surprisingly wrong. Often, positive thinking by itself can make you feel too good. It can make you feel so relaxed that you underperform. To provide the right balance between aspirations and realism during important discussions, appoint one of your teammates to play the Devil's Advocate. It is the Advocate's job to ask tough questions and anticipate all of the ways in which a project can go wrong. It is much better to be *realistically* optimistic.

HOW LEADERS USE IT:

- **Target <u>S</u>pecific Objectives:** An executive who attended Wharton's *Executive Development Program* noted after some reflection that he expressed his ideas like a "machine gun" in team meetings, spraying his words indiscriminately around a conversation and killing his group's creativity. His teammates told him to talk 75 percent less next time. The specific target helped him calibrate his contributions and gave others an opportunity to bring their proposals out into the open.

- **<u>T</u>ake Small Steps:** Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz helped turn around the company in 2008 by reviving the practice of grinding beans in-store. It was a small step, but it helped invigorate a flagging brand by reintroducing the "romance and theater" of buying a great cup of coffee.

- **<u>A</u>lter the Environment:** A health care center altered the environment by combining multiple IT systems into one. The result: because physicians can review and input data at a single integrated site, they are more likely to keep patient information up to date. Promoting the use of simple checklists is another way to alter the environment. During the 2014 Ebola outbreak, the Centers for Disease Control issued a checklist that prompted teams of healthcare providers to follow life-saving guidelines.

- **Be a <u>R</u>ealistic Optimist:** HPTs in the military use so-called Red Teams to reveal all of the risks inherent in a given strategic direction. Red Teams are either groups of insiders or knowledgeable outsiders who test a strategy by trying hard to defeat it. Red Teams reduce groupthink and help a team anticipate challenges that might arise.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- *Committed Teams: Three Steps to Inspiring Passion and Performance*, Mario Moussa, Madeline Boyer, and Derek Newberry (Wiley, 2016). Offers actionable tools, including the STAR model, for improving team outcomes.

- *9 Things Successful People Do Differently*, Heidi Grant Halvorson (Harvard Business Review Press, 2011). Explains science-based strategies for setting goals and motivating yourself to achieve them.

- "Leaders as Decision Architects: Structure Your Organization's Work to Encourage Wise Choices," John Beshears and Francesca Gino, *Harvard Business Review*, May 2015. Discusses the example of the health care center and suggests several ways of altering your organization's environment.

- *The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right*, Atul Guwandi (Picador, 2011), and [The Leader's Checklist: 15 Mission-Critical Principles](#), Nano Tool by Michael Useem. Both provide more information on the power of checklists for creating routines and managing complex situations.

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.