

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

CONFIDENCE WHEN YOU NEED IT MOST: FIVE RITUALS FOR IMPROVED PERFORMANCE

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: G. Richard Shell, Thomas Gerrity Professor, Professor of Legal Studies and Business Ethics and Management, The Wharton School; author of *Springboard: Launching Your Personal Search for Success* (Portfolio/Penguin, 2013).

THE GOAL:

During challenging times, strengthen your confidence with a performance-enhancing ritual

NANOTOOL:

Confidence is the foundation of leadership. Without it, all other leadership skills, no matter how strong, can't come together effectively. After all, if you don't believe in yourself, why should anyone else? But, like motivation, confidence ebbs and flows. It can be threatened at any time, by situations and circumstances that may be anticipated or arise without warning.

By maintaining a set of reliable techniques that you can turn to, you can effectively renew and restore your self-confidence whenever and wherever you need to. These five rituals are used by leaders in Fortune 500 companies, elite athletes, and other highly successful individuals who know their performance depends on confidence.

ACTION STEPS:

When it comes to building confidence, do what works. Like rituals that boost motivation, not all of these techniques will resonate with every leader. Try a few, and develop the ones you like into a habit that can bolster your confidence during challenging times.

- 1. Use Visualization to Rehearse.** Neuroscientists report that visualizing a body movement activates exactly the same areas of the brain as does the actual movement. In addition, visualizing yourself doing something in the future serves as a "rehearsal" for that activity, reducing some of the stress you may be feeling and giving you a chance to imagine how you might overcome certain obstacles that could arise. Both are beneficial to confidence.
- 2. Enact a Performance Ritual.** Rituals have been used throughout human history, across cultures, and in a wide variety of settings. From corner offices to stadiums, battlefields to houses of worship, rituals are practiced to improve performance, build community and morale, and reduce stress and anxiety. Create a routine that puts you in a confidence frame of mind, and use it before or as you face any new challenges.



3. **Give Yourself Small Wins.** Achievement scholars define a small win as a “concrete, complete, implemented outcome of moderate importance ... [a] controllable opportunity that produces visible results.” Don’t write a book — write a page. Don’t climb a mountain — take a step on the path that leads to the summit. Don’t hit a home run — make contact with the ball. Find a way to prepare for a big challenge by succeeding on something small that gets the ball rolling, building momentum — and your confidence.
4. **Recite a Mantra.** The Sanskrit term means words or sounds that are repeated to aid concentration in Buddhist or Hindu meditation. Companies use mantras to define and declare their purpose. For Apple, it was “think different.” At cosmetics company Mary Kay, it’s “enriching women’s lives.” IBM replaced long-standing mantra “think” with “innovation that matters.” Individual leaders often use success slogans, poems, or prayers. What words can you repeat to inspire your best efforts?
5. **Bring a Lucky Charm.** In a 2010 study, researchers from the University of Cologne found that the “activation of a superstition” can result in performance-enhancing effects. Study participants who were told they were putting with a “lucky ball” made their shot 35% more often than those using “ordinary” golf balls. If carrying a rabbit’s foot, special coin, or other token makes you feel lucky, why not?

HOW COMPANIES USE IT:

- American swimmer Michael Phelps is the most decorated Olympic athlete in history. After winning eight gold medals in the 2008 Olympics, he commented, “Before the trials I was doing a lot of relaxation exercises and visualization. And I think that that helped me to get a feel of what it was gonna be like when I got there. I knew that I had done everything that I could to get ready for that meet, both physically and mentally.”
- Sotheby’s auctioneer Tobias Meyer needs complete attention and focus on the job. To prepare for peak performance, he goes through a precise, confidence-enhancing ritual before every auction. Meyer wakes at 7:00, eats a specific breakfast, attends a presale meeting, and then runs on a treadmill for 30 minutes. He then eats a specific lunch and naps for an hour. He drinks a four-shot latte 30 minutes before the auction begins, and wears the same cufflinks and uses the same gavel each time.
- Daniel Chambliss tracked the techniques used by U.S.A. Swimming to get its athletes ready to compete in the Olympic Games. One of the common threads in this training was to focus on a series of “small wins” in training rather than on the larger goal of winning a medal. As Chambliss summarized it, the swimmers “found their challenges in small things: working on a better start this week, polishing up their backstroke technique next week, planning how to pace their swim.” As a result, they got the satisfaction of “very definable, minor achievements,” which in turn gave them the confidence to attempt more small wins each and every day.
- Facebook’s mantra “done is better than perfect” reminds employees that instead of trying to get everything right the first time (an approach that would likely have meant the social media site never would have launched), their focus is to quickly release and learn from smaller iterations. The mantra keeps the focus on continuous innovation and improvement.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- *Springboard: Launching Your Personal Search for Success*, G. Richard Shell (Portfolio/Penguin, 2013). Provides scientific insights and personal assessments for determining a personal definition of success and focusing on what gives meaning and excitement to your life.
- “Small Wins: Redefining the Scale of Social Problems,” Karl E. Weick, *American Psychologist*, 39, No. 1 (1984), p. 40. Argues that finding solutions to social issues depends on how they are framed: when perceived as problems that can be solved through a series of “small wins,” a series of concrete outcomes attracts allies and deters opponents.
- *The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work*, Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer (Harvard Business Review Press, 2011). Shows how leaders can motivate others by offering strategies that build momentum and remove roadblocks to progress.
- Richard Shell teaches in Wharton Executive Education’s [*Executive Negotiation Workshop: Negotiate with Confidence*](#), [*Strategic Persuasion Workshop: The Art and Science of Selling Ideas*](#), [*Advanced Management Program*](#), and many others.

ABOUT NANOTOOLS:

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.