

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

SUPERBOSSSES: HOW GREAT LEADERS BUILD TOP PERFORMERS

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: Sydney Finkelstein, PhD; Steven Roth Professor of Management, Dartmouth College; author of *Superbosses: How Exceptional Leaders Master the Flow of Talent*

THE GOAL:

Create top-performing individuals and teams with a three-facet teaching approach.

NANO TOOL:

During a 10-year study of “superbosses,”—leaders who inspire the best performance from their people and launch astounding numbers of them into their own high-powered careers—a number of specific, common practices of star managers emerged. One involves teaching: specifically, what to teach, when to teach, and how to teach. For these highly successful managers, teaching isn’t merely an “extra”; it’s a responsibility and an integral part of their leadership style. They treat their reports as apprentices, understanding that if they’re not teaching them, they’re not really leading.

Unlike some other leadership practices, teaching like superbosses doesn’t take special talent or training or even a lot of time. It also doesn’t have to mean changing everything else that you’re doing, including more formal training. Simply follow the Action Steps below, making minor adjustments in what, when, and how you teach.

ACTION STEPS:

- 1. Make the time.** Superbosses know that the people they hire are there to learn; they don’t come into the organization knowing everything they need to be successful. If every minute of your day is booked, you won’t have time for teaching or mentoring. Instead, deliberately set aside unstructured time to engage informally, “in the trenches,” with your reports.
- 2. Build relationships.** Because star managers take a deep responsibility for the growth and development of their employees, they work at developing close, trusting relationships (unlike most managers who view these relationships as strictly transactional). Keep lines of communication open, ask questions designed to impart wisdom, work side by side with your reports, model behavior, and offer advice. In short, provide far more personal attention and instruction than most managers do.
- 3. Teach a variety of lessons.** Superbosses impart memorable wisdom on three levels: (1) professional/technical nuances about the business, (2) “make-or-break” advice on how to run businesses and lead organizations, and (3) life lessons such as the need for discipline, hard work, and leading with your values.



HOW LEADERS USE IT:

Under CEO Michael Miles, Kraft's image was transformed in the 1980s from a purveyor of unhealthy, fatty foods into one focused on healthier offerings. He oversaw the introduction of hundreds of new brands and made a number of key acquisitions. He also nurtured top-flight marketing talent: his protégés included the future CEOs of Mattel, Young & Rubicam, Gillette, Sears, and many more. Those team members described him as "unusually accessible." He left his door open, ate lunch in the cafeteria with employees two and three rungs below him, and held impromptu morning conversations with younger staff. These hour-long meetings have been described as "like taking a final exam."

An investment manager learned a thing or two about discipline one day while watching his boss, hedge fund mogul Julian Robertson, consider whether to buy a stock. Robertson had spent a lot of time researching before deciding to invest \$100 million. He placed the order, but in the meantime, consulted with a few people about the company and its industry. The information he got suggested that the stock was perhaps not as attractive as it had seemed. Another manager might have rationalized staying in the deal, especially since the cost of pulling out was 10 percent, or \$10 million. But Robertson pulled out. "He never looked back," said the protégé. "What he taught me was that if the story changes, get out. You can always reevaluate."

When he was making *Star Wars*, filmmaker George Lucas was acutely aware of and interested in innovating on every level. He hired newcomer Ben Burtt to develop the voice of robot R2D2, but instead of relying on the studio library for sounds as every other science fiction movie did, Lucas wanted him to record real-world noises and modify them. The character had to somehow express a humanlike personality. Burtt experimented with different types of sound, running each by Lucas. Eventually, they realized the ones they had vocalized themselves and then mixed with synthesized sounds were the best. Burtt says while Lucas encouraged him to innovate, it was always clear that the director had an uncompromising vision of what he wanted and would push his people hard to achieve it.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- *Superbosses: How Exceptional Leaders Manage the Flow of Talent*, Sydney Finkelstein (Portfolio, 2016). Including the lessons gleaned from a 10-year study of more than 200 superbosses from a range of industries, reveals the specific practices that distinguish these star managers.
- "The Best Leaders Are Great Teachers," Sydney Finkelstein. *Harvard Business Review*, Jan-Feb 2018. Using a range of examples, explains how managers can improve the ways they teach their team to build loyalty, turbocharge their development, and drive superior business performance.
- "[Leadership: Teachable Point of View and Judgment Calls](#)," Noel Tichy Explains why leaders need to develop and convey a teachable point of view and operate in a virtuous teaching cycle (moving continuously between teaching and learning).

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.