

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

REAL BRAIN TRAINING: FIVE MINUTES TO BETTER DECISIONS

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

Improve decision making, spark innovation, enhance collaboration, and boost teamwork by exercising your brain’s “mind-reading” system.

NANO TOOL

Mind reading would be an amazing superpower for any business leader. Imagine the valuable insights that could be unlocked by knowing what your stakeholders really feel, know, need, or want. Although we can’t literally read other people’s minds, we all possess a “social brain network” that enables us to take the perspectives of others and maximize our “mind reading” potential. When we exercise it, we gain a business skill with demonstrated value for improving decisions, sparking innovation, and cultivating collaboration.



The social brain network consists of several brain regions that activate when we interact with others. It partially overlaps with the brain’s so-called “innovation network,” which is engaged when we explore new options—most likely because taking another person’s perspective requires “thinking outside the box” of our own minds. Revving up these two networks—for example, by taking the perspective of someone else—may open the mind to new ideas and insights that can be applied to challenges at work and in our daily lives.¹

Empirical studies confirm that perspective-taking can enhance creative problem solving, improve negotiations, and help teams manage conflict. Activating the social brain network through perspective-taking can also reduce implicit bias. These positive outcomes create continued benefits because training interpersonal skills can generate lasting changes in the function and structure of the social brain network, making it grow larger and more connected.²

Developing perspective-taking is a brain hack that really works (unlike, for example, some popular brain training programs³). Below are two exercises that can effectively train your perspective-taking skills in fewer than 10 minutes a week, either individually or, even better, with your team.

ACTION STEPS

If you repeat the following two exercises at least once every other week, you’re likely to make lasting changes in your brain’s wiring. Continuity and repetition are crucial. As with any other new skill, developing and mastering perspective-taking requires some time and dedicated effort, and may at first cause some uneasiness. For maximum effectiveness, use a stopwatch to spend only the time suggested, and take notes throughout. You can also carry out the exercises with your team following the instructions below.

1: Reflect on a recent perspective-taking experience. (Five minutes total time)

1. Spend 30 seconds recalling a specific situation during the last two weeks when you attempted to take another person's perspective on a topic. This could range from a business negotiation to a conversation with your domestic partner.
2. Spend three minutes describing the situation in detail from beginning to end using written bullet points.
3. Spend one minute imagining the situation from the other person's perspective. Specifically, imagine how you think they would describe the interaction.
4. Reflect for 30 seconds on what you did that was useful to understand the other person's perspective.

After repeating this exercise a few times, you will develop a perspective-taking strategy that works for you. As you do, your brain will build a "database" of successful past perspective-taking situations and learn that this ability is valuable. Over time, this reinforcement may lead you to naturally apply perspective-taking more frequently. This exercise will also sharpen your ability to recognize situations where perspective-taking is beneficial.

2: Prepare for future perspective-taking. (Five minutes total time)

1. Spend one minute thinking of at least three situations during the upcoming two weeks when it might be beneficial to understand someone else's perspective.
2. Reflect for three minutes on one situation; describe what it might look like from beginning to end if you engaged in perspective-taking. Imagine it as clearly as possible, writing down details of how you start, what you keep in mind during the conversation, and how you respond to things the other person might do or say.
3. Reflect for one minute on how perspective-taking might improve the short- and long-term outcomes of the interaction.

This exercise is useful because visualizing situations activates similar brain regions to those that are activated in real situations, thus mimicking real-life practice. Moreover, by imagining future situations, certain details of your imagery can later serve as cues to re-activate your intention to take perspective.

3: Develop perspective-taking skills with others.

Form groups of three and then carry out Exercises 1 and 2. After each exercise, share your reflections with the others for three to four minutes. Listeners should not comment or advise, but can ask questions such as "What did you pay attention to?" or "How do you think she will react?" To make the process more efficient, participants can prepare the reflections in advance, or can choose to focus on Exercise 1.

Sharing with others can lead to higher commitment and accountability for applying perspective-taking. Moreover, listeners benefit through social learning and further build their database of successful perspective-taking experiences in their brains, which can inform future interactions. Finally, the group interactions may lead to a team culture in which perspective-taking becomes the new norm—an ideal condition for succeeding in a complex and rapidly changing business environment.

HOW COMPANIES USE IT

Executive coach Per Hugander developed and applied this tool with executive management teams in scale-ups, incumbents, and government organizations. The tool was a central component of the initiative to strengthen the risk culture at

SEB, a leading Nordic corporate bank. Teams that performed this bi-weekly exercise reported improved speed and quality in decision making, as well as faster progress on strategic challenges⁴. A participant at SEB commented: “We have been able to overcome hurdles that were blocking us, because we’ve taken new perspectives into consideration and our collaborative partners have felt listened to.”

The exercise can be used to enhance leadership and team performance in three ways:

- **Personal development:** Add the exercise to your weekly reflection routine to improve individual performance and decision making. As described above, the training can be enhanced by sharing examples with others. Therefore, finding a partner or group to do the exercise with is a good idea, but not required.
- **Executive training:** Since the exercise is simple but impactful, Hugander often adds this as a “self-managed” addition to executive training programs.
- **Team development:** When used in team-development initiatives, such as at SEB, their ability to make decisions and solve complex business challenges improves quickly. Moreover, the exercise enhances a team’s levels of innovation, cross-collaboration, inclusion, and adaptability.

KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION: RELATED EXECUTIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Michael Platt directs Wharton Executive Education’s [The Neuroscience of Business: Innovations in Leadership and Strategic Decisions](#) and teaches in [Global CEO Program: A Transformational Journey](#) and the [Executive Development Program](#).

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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.