

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

CREATE AUTHENTIC CONNECTIONS WITH VIRTUAL TEAM MEMBERS

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.

GOAL

Enhance online collaboration and trust within remote teams.

NANO TOOL

Four years after the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated remote work, its advantages and drawbacks have been well-documented. For leaders, the biggest hurdles have remained constant: building [employee engagement, trust, and communication](#).



Scientists from the [Wharton Neuroscience Initiative](#) have experimented with a method originally developed for improving in-person social connections, collaboration, and trust, adapting it for use with remote teams. The [evidence-based “Fast Friends” exercise](#) is a structured activity involving self-disclosure: two or more people answer a series of increasingly thought-provoking questions, such as “What would constitute a ‘perfect’ day for you?” This activity fosters deeper social connections, addressing issues of distance and distrust in distributed workforces. It can enhance virtual collaboration and improve team cohesion, productivity, and well-being.

ACTION STEPS

- 1. Curate a list of questions.** Use the 36 original “Fast Friends” questions (found [here](#)), or adapt them to your specific context. Avoid diluting them to “small talk,” as their impact relies on depth. Questions become increasingly profound throughout the session.
- 2. Explain the purpose and structure of the exercise.** The goal is to create and sustain more meaningful relationships, which are beneficial to overall health, team effectiveness, and business success. There are three sets of questions. Participants progress through the cards in each set for about 15 minutes, starting with Set 1, then Set 2, and finishing with Set 3. Participants will begin with question 1 of each set and proceed in order. It’s not required to answer all questions in a set.
- 3. Ensure safety and trust.** Stress the voluntary nature of the exercise and agree upon confidentiality expectations in advance. Tell participants that they can stop at any time or skip questions they do not wish to answer—although venturing slightly beyond one’s comfort zone can yield benefits.
- 4. Randomly assign participants to pairs or trios.** Be mindful of hierarchies: in many contexts, this exercise might be best suited for peers at the same organizational level to ensure comfort. If you do include supervisor-subordinate pairings, let the supervisor answer the first question. You may also choose only to partner people of the same gender or age

group if that seems most fitting. Groups of three can mitigate tension or wariness between individuals of different status or gender.

5. **Use the breakout room feature in Zoom (or another interface) to divide the group into pairs or trios.** Share the questions with all participants via email, a link to a cloud storage service like Google Drive or Dropbox, or the chat. A timer will be used to indicate when it's time to move on to the next question set.
6. **Add a scientific element.** It's often motivating to assess the effects of the exercise. To do so, you could ask participants to rate their level of trust or connection to their exercise partner(s) at the beginning of the session and at the end (e.g., on a scale from 1 to 7), although no one should be obliged to openly share these ratings. You may also want to check in with individuals or teams for some time after the exercise via email to see how Fast Friends impacted team cohesion, well-being, trust, and work outcomes.
7. **Conduct a debrief.** After the exercise, bring everyone back into the main room. Encourage participants to share their experiences.
8. **Abbreviate if necessary.** The most impactful results are derived from comprehensive sessions (45 minutes). However, if needed, you can abbreviate each exercise round to 10 minutes. Even a short session spanning only 3 to 5 minutes before a meeting can be beneficial. In an ice-breaker variation, you can have one person on Zoom pass one of the questions to someone else in the group, who either answers or skips and then passes another question to the next person in the group, for several minutes.

In the brain, engaging in self-disclosure activates regions associated with [reward processing](#). Conversations may also lead to the release of neurotransmitters and hormones [like oxytocin](#) as well as to [synchronization](#) of brain activity amongst participants, thereby enhancing trust and cooperation.

HOW ONE ORGANIZATION USED IT

The Wharton Neuroscience Initiative conducted the exercise with [Matriarca](#), an Argentinian sustainable distributor of clothes, bags, and accessories on a global e-commerce platform. Matriarca's 2,700 artisans represent several geographically diverse ethnic groups who are unified under a single cooperative. The cooperative was challenged to overcome distrust between rural artisans and distribution managers, as well as amongst the artisans themselves who have historically competed for resources.

The neuroscientists adapted the original Fast Friends questions to be culturally appropriate and translated them into Spanish. Because the artisans live in remote rural areas, NGO facilitators and Matriarca staff traveled to their communities to enable computer and internet access and served as translators as needed. Given the vast logistic demands of this project, conducted in the midst of the pandemic, there were only 20 participants. Most did not know each other prior to participating.

Half of the participants engaged in the Fast Friends exercise, while the other half served as a control group, engaging in guided small talk involving less-personal questions. Participants rated their feelings of closeness to their exercise partner before and after the conversation. Both groups felt closer to their partners, and most participants described the experience as pleasant or extremely pleasant. The Fast Friends exercise tended to more strongly increase social connections than did mere small talk.

"We observed improved relationships, and some conflicts seemed to fade," said Matriarca's founder and director Paula Marra after project completion. "The artisans were more open to others in the company who were not like them, and they developed renewed trust in the leadership team. Before, interactions were often confrontational or transactional. Suddenly they became more personal ('Aren't you the one who likes...?'). There was also more of a feeling of community." Thus, Fast Friends can strengthen team bonds, providing an approach that any business seeking to enhance workplace rapport and well-being can employ effectively.

CONTRIBUTOR TO THIS NANO TOOL

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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.