

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS*

EMBRACE THE PIVOT: THE POWER OF CHANGING YOUR MIND

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

Learn to challenge and rethink your decisions and assumptions to make better decisions, foster innovation, and strengthen team dynamics.

NANO TOOL

In a rapidly changing world, the ability to reassess and revise your opinions can be a superpower. Far from signaling weakness, changing your mind is a mark of intellectual agility and strategic foresight. Research from behavioral scientists, organizational psychologists, and management experts illustrates how embracing rethinking enhances decision making, team performance, and organizational adaptability. While there are many benefits to changing your mind (it could make for more satisfying relationships, for one), these three have particular relevance to leadership:

- **Improved Decision Quality:** Research shows that rethinking assumptions helps leaders avoid blind spots, reduce bias, and respond effectively to new information. For example, Keith Stanovich's research on rational thinking^[1] identifies "cognitive decoupling" as a skill that allows individuals to separate their prior beliefs from new evidence, reducing confirmation bias and improving decision making under uncertainty. Additionally, Charlan Nemeth and Brendan Nemeth-Brown demonstrate that dissent and rethinking assumptions in groups lead to better problem-solving outcomes.^[2]
- **Greater Team Performance:** Teams thrive when individuals feel safe admitting they have doubts or were wrong, which helps avoid groupthink and can lead to more open discussions and creative solutions. Research by Amy Edmondson^[3] highlights that teams with a high level of psychological safety perform better and drive higher levels of innovation.
- **Demonstrated Strength:** Leaders who model intellectual humility inspire trust and encourage others to follow their example, creating a culture of learning and adaptability. In *Think Again* (Viking, 2021), Adam Grant demonstrates that confidence without humility breeds blind arrogance, and humility without confidence yields debilitating doubt. "Confident humility," conversely, allows you to believe in yourself while questioning your strategies.

ACTION STEPS

Cultivate your ability to rethink and adapt by integrating these practical strategies into your leadership.

1. **Question Your Assumptions:** Identify a belief or assumption you've held for years. Ask yourself: What evidence would make me change my mind? Share this exercise with your team and invite them to do the same. By normalizing the practice of rethinking, you'll unlock new possibilities for growth and innovation.



2. **Embrace the Joy of Being Wrong:** Celebrate moments when you realize you've been wrong. Malcolm Gladwell suggests reframing mistakes as opportunities for growth, which fosters curiosity and openness. In his podcast *Revisionist History*, Gladwell reexamines moments when he misjudged a situation and discovers valuable lessons by embracing his errors.
3. **Think Like a Scientist:** Approach your beliefs as hypotheses to be tested rather than truths to be defended. Seek out disconfirming evidence and be willing to pivot by creating a "challenge network" of trusted colleagues who will question your ideas and assumptions. This is especially important for leaders at the highest levels, who are often surrounded by people who are reluctant to challenge them.
4. **Recognize the Cost of Stubbornness:** Clinging to outdated beliefs can damage your reputation and hinder progress. In *The Wright Brothers* (Simon & Schuster, 2015), David McCullough attributes the success of the pioneering aviators to their willingness to adapt and experiment, contrasting it with rivals who rigidly stuck to flawed assumptions. The *Revisionist History* podcast discusses a number of other historical figures who thrived because they adapted—and those who failed because they refused to.
5. **Foster a Culture of Rethinking:** Encourage your team to challenge the status quo by modeling humility and rewarding curiosity. This creates an environment where rethinking is the norm. Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella explained why he shifted the company from a "know-it-all" culture to a "learn-it-all" one when he took over: "Culture is something that needs to adapt and change. ... [I]f you take two people, one of them is a learn-it-all and the other one is a know-it-all, the learn-it-all will always trump the know-it-all in the long run, even if they start with less innate capability. ... I need to be able to walk out of here this evening and say, 'Where was I too closed-minded, or where did I not show the right kind of attitude of growth in my own mind?' If I can get it right, then we're well on our way to having the culture we aspire to."
6. **Make It Personal:** Gladwell suggests journaling or recording moments when you've changed your mind to reflect on personal growth. Revisiting past decisions with fresh eyes can reveal hidden biases and improve future judgment.

HOW LEADERS USED IT

- **Airbnb:** The home-sharing platform pivoted during the COVID-19 pandemic from urban and international travel to local, long-term stays, catering to remote workers with "work-from-anywhere" options. This shift helped the company weather the crisis and thrive in a changing travel market.
- **Pixar:** The animation studio thrives by fostering a feedback-rich environment where team members are encouraged to rethink and improve their work through "braintrust" sessions. These collaborative meetings allow for candid feedback and iterative improvements during film production.
- **Procter & Gamble:** Leaders at P&G use decision pre-mortems (as opposed to the more common post-mortem, held when it's too late to identify potential flaws and rethink strategies before implementation), improving outcomes and avoiding costly missteps.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS NANO TOOL

This Nano Tool includes references to many researchers and thought leaders, including Adam Grant, PhD, Saul P. Steinberg Professor of Management, The Wharton School; professor of psychology, The University of Pennsylvania; host of the WorkLife podcast; and author of four best-selling books including *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*.

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.

[1] <https://academic.oup.com/book/5930>

[2] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272767630_Better_than_Individuals_The_Potential_Benefits_of_Dissent_and_Diversity_for_Group_Creativity

[3] <https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=54851#:~:text=With%20so%20much%20riding%20on,constant%20learning%20and%20healthy%20innovation.>