

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

SHIFTING MINDSETS: QUESTIONS THAT LEAD TO RESULTS

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: Marilee Adams, PhD; President and founder of the Inquiry Institute; Adjunct Professor at American University, School of Public Affairs, in the Key Executive Leadership Program; and author of *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life: 10 Powerful Tools for Life and Work*.

THE GOAL:

Quickly change the mindset of your team — or yourself — from being “stuck” to finding possibilities and solutions.

NANO TOOL:

Our mindsets are determined by the questions we ask. Some questions have the potential to catalyze breakthroughs and inspire transformations. Others lead to stagnation and demoralization. The difference lies in whether you ask Learner Questions or Judger Questions.

“Learner Questions” are open-minded, curious, and creative. They promote progress and possibilities, and typically lead to discoveries, understanding, and solutions. By contrast, “Judger Questions” are more closed-minded, certain, and critical. They focus on problems rather than solutions and often lead to defensive reactions, negativity, and inertia. Learner Questions facilitate progress by expanding options; Judger Questions impede progress by limiting perspectives.

It’s natural for individuals and teams to ask both Learner and Judger Questions, but without Learner Questions, results suffer. Leaders who can effectively distinguish between the two, cultivating a Learner mindset, can improve the performance, productivity, and morale of their teams and their organizations — as well as heighten their own success as a leader. Studies by Peter Heslin, Gary Latham, and Don VandeWalle demonstrate that when managers shift to a learning mindset, they’re more likely to recognize changes in employee performance and spend greater time coaching, mentoring, and developing their employees.

Typical questions in the Learner and Judger mindsets often look like this:

Judger Questions

Who is to blame? Why can’t they perform?
How can I prove I’m right?
How can I protect my turf?
Why aren’t we winning?
What could we lose?
Why bother?

Learner Questions

What are my goals? What am I responsible for?
What are the facts and what am I assuming?
How can I help?
What do our customers/stakeholders want?
What steps can we take to improve the situation?
What’s possible?



Stanford professors Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton argue that there's often a gap between what we know and what we do in organizations, and this applies to mindsets. People intuitively recognize the value of a Learner mindset, but often find it difficult to enact.

However, research also shows that it's worth the effort. Teams that operate with a Learner mindset are more productive, motivated, and engaged; and research by Stuart Bunderson and Kathleen Sutcliffe show that learning orientation can enable business units to achieve higher profitability.

ACTION STEPS:

- 1. Work on your own mindset first.** Notice whether you are asking yourself Learner or Judger Questions, and the effect they have on your mood, engagement, and productivity. Then create Learner Questions that are focused on achieving your goals in specific areas. Is there an issue that you've been struggling with lately? Check to see if most of your focus has been on Judger Questions. If so, how can you switch to a Learner mindset? (see the Top 12 Questions for success in Additional Resources.)
- 2. Elevate the quality of meetings.** Before any meeting you lead or attend, write down possible questions you could ask with a Learner focus, such as: What will it take to move this forward? Who has a possible solution for this? What is the best way to allocate our resources? You'll get the best solutions, and the fastest results, by asking the right questions.
- 3. Boost your team's energy, engagement, and productivity.** Notice the questions your team members typically ask, and the impact on morale, collaboration, problem solving, and results. Explain the Learner-Judger mindsets to your team, then encourage them to focus more on Learner questions. Be sure you consistently model the Learner behaviors yourself and acknowledge your team as they begin to make the shift. Then watch for ways that this increases their productivity, engagement, and results.

HOW COMPANIES USE IT:

By changing the questions they ask, companies can shift mindsets and behavior to produce remarkably more positive results.

- Senior Director of Organizational Effectiveness at Flextronics, Carmella Granado, coached a poorly performing manufacturing/repair operations site in the principles of Learner/Judger. For two years the site's Key Performance Indicators (including revenue, operating profit, value added margin, ROIC, inventory turns, quality, on-time delivery, customer satisfaction, etc.) were the lowest scores compared to 14 other sites in the division. Carmella began applying the Learner/Judger principles in March 2010, holding meetings with the team leaders to explain the concept, giving them reading assignments in *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life*, and providing weekly group coaching sessions that guided the leaders through the process of using Learner Questions to brainstorm solutions to current challenges. They no longer shot down new ideas based on old assumptions. Instead, they used Learner Questions (instead of Judger statements) to explore potential ways to increase revenue and margins. They asked their customers Learner Questions, and used the insights to create profitable updates to products and services. They asked line managers Learner Questions — and listened with less judgment — which led to the design and implementation of new business processes that improved quality and customer satisfaction. There was also a trickle-down effect as the leaders coached their direct reports in how to approach situations with a Learner mindset, creating a learning culture throughout the site. Within three months, the new approach had brought about a turnaround. The site moved to the #1 position in the division (based on the KPI's) and it consistently remains in the top 3 sites out of 21 sites today.

- A senior executive at a major training and consulting firm faced the challenge of building the business unit executives into a cohesive decision-making team. The executives felt constrained and threatened by impending changes in the company, and most of their interactions were from a Judger mindset. The senior executive coached the team members one-on-one and in meetings, challenging them to ask more Learner Questions and to stop themselves whenever they fell back into making judgmental comments. Later, he commented, “The transformation of the group dynamics was so striking that others in the company, including the CEO, commented on the positive change. Meetings were more productive, the work environment was more collegial, and business results were improving. People saw real behavioral change at the leadership level.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life: 10 Powerful Tools for Life and Work*. Marilee Adams (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009; second edition). Includes a chapter on The Inquiring Leader and ten practical tools to help leaders choose and use the Inquiring Mindset.
- *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Carol Dweck (Ballantine Books, 2007). Reviews evidence on how shifting to a learning mindset can increase performance.
- *The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches*. Roger Schwarz (Jossey-Bass, 2002). Examines best practices for enabling groups to develop a learning mindset and achieve greater effectiveness.
- “The Spirit and Discipline of Organizational Inquiry,” Marilee Goldberg Adams, *The Manchester Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1998. Suggests a unifying concept focused on question-asking processes that can strengthen the power of organizational inquiry in creating competitive advantage.
- *Leading with Questions: How Leaders Find the Right Solutions by Knowing What to Ask*. Michael Marquardt (Jossey Bass, 2005). Shows how to ask questions that generate short-term results and long-term learning and success.
- *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization*. Peter Senge (Crown Business; revised edition, 2006). Ground-breaking book originally published in 1990 documenting the importance of a learning mindset, showing that in the long run, a major source of sustainable competitive advantage is your organization’s ability to learn faster than the competition.
- [The Inquiry Institute](#) offers many additional resources including articles, the [Top 12 Questions for Success](#), and the Choice Map™ — an illustration of Learner and Judger Questions.

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.