NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

LEADERSHIP INFLUENCE: CONTROLLING EMOTIONAL CONTAGION

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

Create an environment, whether in person or virtual, that enhances employee engagement and performance by paying attention to the emotional contagion occurring in your team.

NANO TOOL

Employees are not emotional islands. Rather, they continuously spread their own moods and receive and are influenced by others' moods, a phenomenon known as emotional contagion. Contagion happens most powerfully when people are together physically, but new studies show that emotions also transfer across video, television, social media, and even email. The effects, which take place equally with positive and negative emotions, are even stronger in stable workgroups where there is greater interdependence.
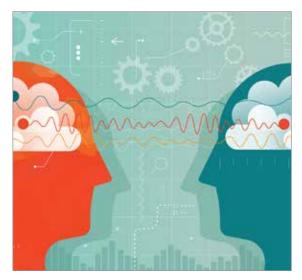
As a leader, controlling emotional contagion, especially during the pandemic, should be a priority. Ignoring the power of mood, whether it originates in the self or is "caught" through contact with others, means losing an important opportunity to influence outcomes. Cognition and emotion are completely intertwined: if you and your team are stressed, fearful, or worried, your decision making and ability to process information are negatively affected. Conversely, positive emotions lead to better employee attitudes, creativity, and job performance.

Negative mood contagion—as opposed to recognition of widespread individual feelings of anxiety and fear that have occurred during the pandemic—may be necessary sometimes to achieve a specific team goal but should be relegated to short-term situations. For example, team leaders may want to elicit shared feelings of frustration or anger in cases where teams have lost to a competitor or have not met their goals, or they may want to induce feelings of legitimate fear when getting teams to understand organizational realities and accept why a change effort is important.

Use your knowledge of the impact of mood contagion to create more positive team dynamics, increase performance, and decrease turnover by consciously managing your own emotions and the emotions you want to spread in your team. The five Action Steps below can guide your efforts.

ACTION STEPS

1. **Be consciously aware of your own mood.** If it's not one that will be useful to your team, change it. To get in a more positive mood, take one minute and imagine a past situation in which you felt really positive or a future situation that would make you very happy. Also, change your facial expression to the one you would have if you were

happy—even if you don't feel it in the moment, research consistently shows that your mood will follow your facial expression.

2. **Use nonverbal behaviors to communicate emotional contagion.** As most emotional communication occurs through body language, facial expression, and tone (with less than 10 percent communicated through words), pay attention to your body language as you communicate your emotions, whether in person or virtually. For example, you may be crossing your arms because you are cold, but the people observing you will likely believe you are defensive or angry, automatically mimic your arm crossing, and begin to feel that way.

3. **Make direct eye contact with everyone on the team.** Focus on spreading your positive emotional contagion to others on your team. Team members are most likely to catch your emotions when they look at you directly. You can help them do so by initiating eye contact. When managing a remote workforce, schedule quick, frequent video check-ins to accomplish this step.

4. **Neutralize a negative team member.** Being aware that emotional contagion exists can help inoculate you against a negative team member. Talking to a negative person can help; people often don't realize how negatively they are being perceived, or how their negative emotions are influencing the team. When team members are being intentionally negative, determining and discussing the source of the negativity can be helpful. If these steps don't work, avoid sharing your gaze more than necessary in meetings with negative people. This will decrease the chance of catching their negative emotions subconsciously through mimicry of their facial expressions and body language.

5. **Create a positive emotional culture within the team.** Emotional culture consists of the symbols, norms, values, and basic assumptions team members have about emotions that are acceptable to express and those that need to be suppressed in the team. As research has shown that more anger is expressed at work than happiness and joy, be sure to create an environment in which positive emotions are not only allowed but encouraged. Making it clear that destructive negative emotions and the behaviors that come with them—such as bullying, back stabbing, and incivility—will not be tolerated can help create an environment in which they are less likely to occur, take root, and spread.

HOW A LEADER USES IT

"Positive leadership—conveying the idea that there is always a way forward—is so important because that is what you are here for—to figure out how to move the organization forward," said former president and chief executive officer of the Ford Motor Company Alan Mulally. The "relentlessly optimistic" leader kept his workforce on track through the auto crisis in 2008 by connecting with individual employees at every level, meeting with and calling them as the self-designated "cheerleader in chief." On a larger scale, he created the One Ford initiative, "Working Together" Management System, and Creating Value Roadmap to unite the organization in his positive vision of the future of the company, which under his guidance went from near collapse to industry leader.

KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION: RELATED EXECUTIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

- Sigal Barsade directs *High-Potential Leaders: Accelerating Your Impact* and *Leadership in a New Era of Health Care*, and teaches about emotional intelligence and emotional contagion in many other programs including *Advanced Management Program*, *Effective Execution of Organizational Strategy*, and *The Adaptable Leader: Leading in a Virtual World*.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- "The Contagion We Can Control," Sigal Barsade. *Harvard Business Review*, Mar. 26, 2020. Explores emotional contagion as it relates to the pandemic, offering tips for controlling the spread of negative mood and increasing positivity.

- "Why Does Affect Matter in Organizations?" Sigal Barsade and Donald Gibson, *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 36-59, Feb. 2007. Shows how employees' moods, emotions, and dispositional affect influence critical organizational outcomes such as job performance, decision making, creativity, turnover, pro-social behavior, teamwork, negotiation, and leadership.

- "The Ripple Effect: Emotional Contagion and Its Influence on Group Behavior," Sigal Barsade, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 47, 644-675, 2002. Reveals study findings that emotional contagion exists at the work-group level and shows the influence of four different types of emotions on group processes including cooperation, conflict, and negotiation outcomes.

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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.