**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.

**For Better Results, Emotional Contagion Matters**

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**THE GOAL:**
Create an environment 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. When they work in groups, they can catch each others’ emotions like viruses, a phenomenon known as emotional contagion. These effects become even more powerful in stable workgroups where there is greater work interdependence.

Executives can use their knowledge of the impact of mood contagion to create more positive team dynamics, increase performance, and decrease turnover by consciously managing their own emotions and the emotions they want to spread in their teams. As positive emotions have most often been found to lead to better employee attitudes, creativity, and job performance, leaders will likely want to elicit positive emotional contagion within the team environment. Negative mood contagion may be sometimes necessary 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. Because employees pay great attention to their leaders’ emotions, leaders can strongly influence the mood, and thus attitudes and performance, of their teams through emotional contagion.

**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 your nonverbal behaviors to communicate emotional contagion.** As most emotional communication occurs through body language, facial expression, and tone (with less than 10% communicated through words), pay attention to your body language as you communicate your emotions. 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.

4. **Neutralize 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. Also, there can be reasonable reasons for negativity — negative emotions can be important signals when something is wrong. So the first step is to speak with the negative team member. If these steps don’t work, being aware that emotional contagion exists can help inoculate you against a negative team member. Emotional contagion transfers due to attention. 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 people are more willing to express their anger, as compared to joy at work, 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. Creating a culture of joy, caring and compassion has been very successful for Southwest Airlines. Part of its strategy is attracting positive people — hiring through ads such as “When we feel good, It’s contagious,” and creating a culture of caring and compassion for their employees. Doing so has helped Southwest maintain ongoing profitable growth in an industry that has been plagued with financial challenges for years.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

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


- **Emotional Contagion.** Elaine Hatfield, John Cacioppo, and Richard Rapson (Cambridge University Press, 1994). This book describes many situations involving emotional contagion, and goes into detail about the behavioral mimicry and synchronization mechanisms that underlie this phenomenon. The authors also offer practical suggestions for how to best influence others’ emotions.

- Barsade, Sigal G., Coutifaris, Constantinos & Pillemer, Julianna (2018). “Emotional Contagion in Organizational Life.” Research in Organizational Behavior. This article reviews research in emotional contagion, including what it is, how it transfers, who is more or less susceptible, and the influence it has at work.

• Sigal Barsade directs and teaches emotional intelligence in Wharton Executive Education’s *High-Potential Leaders: Accelerating Your Impact* and *Leadership in a New Era of Health Care*. She also teaches in the *Advanced Management Program* and *The Adaptable Leader: Strategies for Emerging Leadership*, among many other programs.

**ABOUT NANO TOOLS:**

*Nano Tools for Leaders®* was conceived and developed by Deb Giffen, MCC, Director of Innovative Learning Solutions at Wharton Executive Education. It is jointly sponsored by Wharton Executive Education and Wharton’s Center for Leadership and Change Management, Wharton Professor of Management Michael Useem, Director. Nano Tools Academic Director, Professor Adam Grant.
NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

IMPROVE PRODUCTIVITY AND RETENTION BY COMBATING WORKPLACE LONELINESS

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.

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THE GOAL:
Reduce workplace loneliness to improve performance across your organization.

NANO TOOL:
There is increased focus on the negative influence of loneliness on a variety of health outcomes including earlier mortality, higher blood pressure, and increased risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke. It has been taken so seriously that it has been called an “epidemic” by former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, and Britain even appointed a minister for loneliness.

In the workplace, loneliness makes people less effective by lowering their commitment to the organization and reducing their access to their peers, leading to poorer performance. In our study of 672 employees holding over 100 different positions and 114 supervisors across two organizations, my colleague Hakan Ozcelik and I found that the lonelier employees were, the lower the performance ratings they received from their supervisor.

Why? We discovered two mechanisms. One was that they were less emotionally committed to their organization, which meant they didn’t work as hard or perform as well. The second mechanism had to do with how coworkers perceived lonely employees. They viewed them as distant and less approachable. And because of that, lonelier people end up having less contact with other employees. This can lead them to be left out of informal, but useful, work conversations and don’t allow them to receive the benefit of the help they need from their coworkers.

It’s important to note that loneliness is not a personality trait. Research has shown that it is distinct from things like being depressed or lacking social skills. Loneliness is situational: it happens when individuals perceive that their social needs aren’t being met in a particular environment.

Unfortunately, once someone feels lonely in a given situation, they fall into a vicious cycle of unwittingly making things worse for themselves. While they desperately want to connect, the psychological phenomena that come with loneliness kick in. Lonelier people become self-centered and may either over-share or under-share personal information. Plus, they become hypervigilant socially, misinterpreting interactions with people. For instance, if out of the blue a coworker brings a lonelier person a cup of coffee, or invites them out for coffee, the lonelier employee might not even register the fact it was a nice thing for their colleague to do, or assume their colleague asks everyone to go to coffee. Colleagues, for their
part, may begin ignoring the lonely person or can even start to have resentment as the lonelier person behaves in ways that feel like they are unapproachable or rejecting their colleagues.

Many supervisors may assume that workplace loneliness is an individual’s problem to work out on their own. But loneliness is social and situational, as mentioned above, and we now have evidence that it negatively influences work outcomes. In addition, loneliness is not simply the lonely employee’s problem; it influences colleagues as well as performance outcomes, which should concern every manager.

**ACTION STEPS:**

The good news is there are concrete actions managers can take to reduce loneliness. Studies have found that the most effective strategy is to get lonelier employees to change the way they are thinking about their appraisals of their situation, the people in it, and their environment. Because loneliness is a completely subjective judgment of whether people feel they are getting their social and emotional needs met in a particular situation, talking through their perceptions and getting them to reframe the situation would be the most effective. However, understanding that this could be difficult, there are other things that you can do situationally to make things better:

1. **Create more positive and less negative emotion in workplace cultures.** In our study we found that a culture of companionate love (expressing affection, caring, compassion, and tenderness towards coworkers) helped to reduce the negative influence of loneliness on commitment. This type of positive work environment will help employees feel more comfortable around one another and encourage social interaction and positive communication. Avoid a culture of anger and frustration. We found in our study that this had the opposite effect of a culture of companionate love, and increased the negative influence of loneliness on commitment. Given that lonely employees are hypervigilant to social threat, a culture of anger will just exacerbate this.

2. **Listen well.** Truly listening to people, including giving all of your attention, not interrupting, and asking good questions can help lonely people really feel seen and heard. Also, as we tend not to “see” lonely people as much, create opportunities for lonelier employees to be highlighted in their contribution to a project, or to share something unique from their non-work lives. However, make sure you really listen when they do so.

3. **Encourage in-person or video communication.** By modeling a method other than email, voicemail, or text, you are showing your direct reports that you value personal connections. Plus, these types of communication have been shown to be both faster and clearer in most situations; the addition of physical cues makes it less likely that you’ll be misunderstood. They also allow for the non-verbal communication that can better signal closeness and interest.

4. **Encourage mentoring.** Pairs work well. But don’t simply pair up a lonely employee with an outgoing one. The idea is to help foster a relationship, so the level of emotional intelligence or empathy of the mentor is more important than his or her sociability. The lonely person can also be the mentor. Also, don’t think of pairing up two lonely people — lonelier people don’t have the bandwidth to take care of other lonely people.

5. **Start new hires as a cohort.** By going through the onboarding process as part of a group, new hires have the opportunity to get to know one another and build better connections.

**HOW ORGANIZATIONS USE IT:**

Sandeep Kumar Aggarwal, founder and CEO of SKA Management, uses “Crush it Calls” to help his geographically diverse workforce build social connections and motivate one another. “During our Crush it Calls, every employee calls out
a particular coworker for crushing it,” explained Aggarwal. “This is a chance for coworkers to show appreciation through recognition and engage an individual with the team.”

HubSpot has a monthly automated introduction to one employee, which allows people to expand who they know in the organization outside of their department and increase the potential for connection.

Airbnb brings new hires in as a group, intentionally fostering relationships among them. Global Head of Employee Experience at Airbnb Mark Levy says, “We create belonging by enabling them to form a group that hopefully stays together as they progress here through their careers. We schedule different kinds of lunches and meetings to help people to understand their colleagues they’re going to be working with. We ask all new hires to share a fun fact and why they came to work here, not just about their job, but who they are, what they are into and how they ended up working at Airbnb.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- “No Employee an Island: Workplace Loneliness and Job Performance,” Hakan Ozcelik and Sigal Barsade (The Academy of Management Journal, Feb. 2018). Investigates the link between workplace loneliness and job performance, and highlights the importance of recognizing the pernicious power of workplace loneliness over both lonelier employees and their organizations.

REFERENCE:

- https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5831910/

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