

## Exploring Authentic Leadership with Millennials

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### Abstract

Undergraduate students enrolled in Personal Leadership Development participated in *Project 2043*, an activity designed to enhance authentic leadership development. Students examined the congruency of their visions, values, and behaviors as expressed on student-created virtual Facebook timelines. We implemented the activity over two class meetings. Day One focused on personal vision and leadership vision, and Day Two focused on the congruency of visions, values, and behaviors. Students indicated that the activity helped them explore what they value in life, and realize that their true values show up in their actions. This practice piece outlines *Project 2043* and offers suggested recommendations for leadership educators who would like to implement a similar activity in their classrooms.

### Introduction

Authentic leadership begins with developing authenticity, or being true to the self. Movement toward authenticity is accomplished through self-awareness, self-acceptance, and authentic actions and relationships (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005). Authentic leadership is a root construct, meaning it underlies the basis for what constitutes other forms of positive leadership. When a leader's actions are genuine and focused on the development of the self and others, the effectiveness of participative, achievement-oriented, transactional, supportive, and other forms of leadership are likely enhanced. Authentic leadership requires heightened levels of self-awareness, leading to authentic leaders knowing where they stand on important issues, values, and beliefs (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). This practice piece describes an activity developed to help students explore their personal and leadership visions through the creation of a virtual Facebook timeline. The activity helped students become self-aware by examining the congruency of their visions, values, and behaviors as expressed through their timelines. Personal examination in turn helped students explore issues of authentic leadership development.

As part of the Agricultural Leadership program at Oklahoma State University, undergraduate students have the opportunity to enroll in Personal Leadership Development as part of their

coursework (Pennington & Weeks, 2006). A personal leadership development course is one of the eight agreed upon courses to be included in a collegiate-level agricultural leadership program, and developing personal and leadership visions is one of the 26 agreed upon objectives (Morgan, King, Rudd, & Kaufman, 2013). Leadership educators intentionally design courses that incorporate a variety of experiential learning opportunities, infusing experiential opportunities with the classroom experiences (Velez, Moore, Bruce, & Stephens, 2014). In personal leadership and development courses, students expand their own worlds in order to become more aware of their leadership potential (Velez et al., 2014).

### **Literature Review**

Self-exploration, understanding one's true self, and recognizing one's values are all parts of authentic leadership development. Personal Leadership Development is intended to enhance self-awareness through an exploration of personal values, and then aligning behaviors with identified values (Pennington, 2006). Pennington (2006) "proposes the personal leadership development course as a model for authentic leadership development in the collegiate classroom with the understanding that authentic leadership development is a life-long process that can be enhanced through formal study" (p. 13).

The majority of the students enrolled in Personal Leadership Development are Millennials, those born after 1982 (Hanson, Drumheller, Mallard, McKee, & Schlegal, 2011). These students are more focused on social interactions and connectedness than students of the past (McMahon & Pospisil, 2005). Students today are technologically savvy, adaptable (Wallace, 2013), goal oriented, and desire instant feedback ("How the New Generation," 2007). In fact, 73% of the social networking users in this age group of students have Facebook profiles (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Additionally, over one-third of students log onto Facebook daily, and 21% log on multiple times per day (Jones, Johnson-Yale, Millermaier, & Perez, 2009).

McGlynn (2005) suggested that instructors should invent new teaching and learning strategies and learn to effectively use technology to enhance the learning of Millennials. Class discussions, projects and presentations, self-assessments and instruments, and critical reflections have also all been identified as signature pedagogies in undergraduate leadership education (Jenkins, 2012). As a result, faculty members recognized the importance of creating a relevant activity to help students achieve the objectives of Personal Leadership Development at Oklahoma State University. To keep current with the trends of today's students, *Project 2043* was initially developed in 2012 and modified in 2013 to help students (a) communicate their personal and leadership visions, and (b) explore congruency among their visions, values, and behaviors. *Project 2043* challenged students to think about how their lives may unfold 30 years into the future and how their life events might be recorded on their future Facebook timelines, hence the name of the activity.

### **Description of the Experience**

The *Project 2043* activity allows students to visually depict how their vision may be realized throughout their lives on a student-created futuristic Facebook timeline spanning 2013 to 2043. Two class meetings are needed to implement this activity. The activity is intended to reinforce leadership concepts that have already been studied in class including personal and leadership visions, and the congruency of values and behaviors. Costs for the implementation of *Project*

2043 are minimal. Supplies needed include: easel size self-adhesive paper, markers, and mini sticky note pads.

*Day 1—Focus: Personal Vision and Leadership Vision*

Each student is given an easel size self-adhesive sheet of paper to create a timeline. To stimulate creativity, students are given an assortment of colored markers and background music is played. Students are asked to think about how their personal and leadership visions might be carried out over the next 30 years of their lives, visually depicting the sequence of events on their timelines. Students are provided a handout describing the specific requirements of the activity, including the following instructions:

1. Timeline must extend at least 30 years into the future or to the end of your life.
2. Include at least 25 timeline updates
3. Include at least three pictures
4. Include a cover photo
5. Include a profile photo
6. Pictures and photos should be hand drawn
7. All other creativity is appreciated!

*Day 2—Focus: Congruence—Vision, Values, and Behaviors*

At the beginning of class, students review a fairly comprehensive list of common values available in the course text, *Discovering the Leader in You* (King, Altman, & Lee, 2011), and are asked to rate each as always, often, sometimes, seldom, or never based on their personal values. While the students are rating their list of values, the instructor should post the timelines created on Day 1 on the walls around the room. After the students have finished identifying their personal values, the values list is then set aside for later use.

Next, all students are asked to evaluate each of their classmates' *Project 2043* timelines for values that they believe are demonstrated through their peers' timelines. The instructor should give the students a small sticky note pad and ask them to look at all the *Project 2043* timelines. Instruct the students to select a value they see reflected on each of their classmates' timelines. Have them write the value on a sticky note and post it beside the Facebook update reflecting that value.

After all the students identify one value on each of their classmates' timelines, students will then compare the values list they created at the beginning of class with the feedback (in the form of small sticky notes) that they received from their peers. Specifically, instruct students to look at their own timelines and the values that their classmates identified. Ask the students to count the number of times each value appeared, and then reflect on the values others saw versus what values they identified on the list of common values as ones they believe to be most important.

Conclude the activity by discussing congruency of visions, values, and behaviors with the students. The following questions were used to guide reflection:

1. Are there other values you hold that your classmates missed? Why do you think this happened?

2. Did your classmates identify values you do not hold? Why do you think these values surfaced?

Encourage students to keep their timelines to assist them with future assignments relating to examining their personal leadership visions and congruency of their behaviors and values.

### **Results to Date**

After first implementing the activity in fall 2012, Day 2 was added in fall 2013 to help the students identify congruency of their visions, values, and behaviors. Students were asked to provide their reactions to the activity. A sample of student comments from two fall 2013 Personal Leadership Development classes include:

“It helped me really plan out my future. It gave me an idea of what I want to do with my life and the things that I value in life” (A. Somerhalder, personal communication, October 17, 2013).

“Our true values show up in our actions” (J. Carey, personal communication, October 17, 2013)

“I value helping others and it was missed because I didn’t portray it in my timeline” (R. Rose, personal communication, October 17, 2013).

### **Recommendations for Leadership Educators**

For leadership educators wishing to implement the *Project 2043* activity in their personal leadership development classroom, we offer the following recommendations. First, the activity is not designed as a stand-alone leadership training workshop. The activity has been created to fit within a personal leadership development course. The success of *Project 2043* is due in part to the learning activities and topics that surround the two-day lesson. Students in the course have been examining a variety of topics related to personal leadership development throughout the semester including authentic leadership, costs of leadership, the relationship between personal vision and leadership vision, personal strengths, and congruence of visions, values, and behaviors.

In addition to using the activity within in a larger personal development course, it is recommended that adequate time be devoted to the activity. We currently devote two full class periods (or 2.5 hours) to the activity. It is important that a relaxed atmosphere be created during Day 1 of the activity assuring that students have ample time to create their Facebook timelines. We allow a full 1 hour, 15 minutes for creation of the timelines. Basic instructions and supplies are given, music is played, and students are then allowed to find a comfortable spot in the classroom to focus on the creative part of the activity.

In the past we have used similar activities to teach the concept of congruence of visions, values, and behaviors; however, it is the *Project 2043* activity that has resonated most strongly with our students. We strongly recommend the use of Facebook as a platform for the activity. It allows us to teach a new concept (congruence) within a context that students are very comfortable. The creation and analysis of the Facebook timelines is an easily grasped concept for our students. Our

students currently make daily updates to Facebook by posting pictures, activities, plans, and philosophical ponderings and can imagine what their own Facebook pages might look like in the future.

Finally, incorporating peer feedback is integral to the success of the activity. Asking students on Day 2 to analyze the timelines created by their peers allows each student the opportunity to receive feedback from approximately 30 different students. The feedback is straightforward and relevant to specific entries on the timeline. Students can then identify themes and look for congruence between what they believe they value as compared to their vision and projected behaviors.

For additional information on incorporating *Project 2043* in the leadership classroom please contact one of the authors.

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