

LOOKING BACK IN ORDER TO MOVE AHEAD AS A LEADER: A Personal Journey Line Narrative Exercise

Abstract

This article outlines a personal Journey Line Narrative exercise aimed at enhancing leader authenticity and effectiveness by asking students to “look back” and identify their core values, as well as the formative experiences that helped solidify those values. The Journey Line Narrative encourages reflection and self-awareness by asking students to answer the question “Who am I?”, to articulate this reflection to a mentor, and to distill this reflection into a coherent essay. This exercise can be useful in courses focused on leader development by helping aspiring leaders develop and communicate their authenticity, core values, and purpose.

Introduction

This exercise asks students to ‘look back’ – to reflect on their life experiences, and connect those experiences to core values in order to clearly and compellingly answer the question “Who am I?” The exercise is most appropriate for undergraduate students or graduate students in an organizational behavior (OB) or leadership course. Similar to other reflective exercises with a focus on communicating personal values to others (Reilly, 2018; Tyran, 2017), this exercise asks students to not only solidify their core values in their own minds but to communicate those values, as well as how they came to hold those values. Students are asked to specifically identify three core values and to explain how they came to hold those values by linking them to significant developmental or transformative events or experiences in their lives. The inclusion of a student-selected mentor is a key distinction between the Journey Line Narrative detailed in this article and other reflective exercises.

Since this exercise is part of an OB course, we

also require students to apply their knowledge of assigned readings and class discussions. We feel the application of OB concepts in the paper is especially useful because the exercise is part of a graded course, and because it has been suggested that applying OB concepts to personal experience helps students make sense of their experiences, as well as gain a deeper understanding of the OB concepts they are exposed to in class (McNeely, 2000).

A key outcome of this exercise is to help students become more authentic leaders, a suitable goal we find for students enrolled in leadership classes as authentic leaders have been linked to improved leader effectiveness (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner, Cogliser, & Dais, 2011).

Theoretical Foundation

The Journey Line Narrative involves students reflecting on their formative experiences. Reflection is defined as, “the intentional consideration of an experience

in light of particular learning objectives” (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997, p. 1). Reflecting on one’s life experience supports self-awareness and leader development (Matthews & Lerner, 2017; Dehler & Edmonds, 2006; Hedberg, 2008; Quijada, McGrath, & Wheaton, 2016). Also reflection focused on formative, developmental experiences and the relationship of those events to one’s values is thought to be key in the leader development process (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Bennis, 2003).

Reflection and the resulting self-awareness is key to leader development, but each also plays a role in authentic leadership. Authentic leadership is an increasingly prominent topic in the realm of leader development and has been linked to leader effectiveness (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner, Cogliser, & Dais, 2011). Authenticity, in the context of authentic leadership theory, refers to “owning one’s personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs, wants, preferences, or beliefs” and implies that one acts in accord with the true self (Harter, 2002, p. 382). This “owning of experiences” leads to self-awareness, which is often brought about by reflection. While reflection can take many forms, research suggests that crafting one’s personal reflection into a coherent story can increase self-awareness and self-concept clarity, contributing to the development of authentic leaders (Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Sparrowe, 2005).

This creation of a historical self-narrative is not simply useful for helping leaders increase their self-awareness and authenticity. Communicating this story to others – learning to articulate one’s values and how they came to hold those values – can be as valuable as the reflection required to craft one’s story (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Communicating one’s personal narrative provides followers with a source of information on which to base their judgments about the leader’s authenticity (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). In fact, life storytelling has been shown to partially predict followers’ perceptions of leader authenticity

(Weischer, Weibler, & Petersen, 2013). It is with this in mind that we created the reflective Journey Line Narrative exercise. This exercise is similar to other reflective exercises used by numerous faculty (see for example Reilly, 2018 or Tyran, 2007), but contains some unique elements – most notably the use of a mentor to aid in reflection.

Learning Objectives

The student learning objectives for this exercise follow:

1. Engage in reflection to improve your understanding of yourself – thereby enhancing self-awareness.
2. Practice communicating your authentic self.
3. Apply and demonstrate knowledge of OB theories and class concepts relevant to your developmental journey as a leader.

Exercise Overview and Logistics

Because of the requirement to apply OB concepts in the Journey Line Narrative, we have found the exercise is best positioned toward the middle, or in the second half of our course, ensuring students have been exposed to several concepts that we have found to be relevant to the exercise (e.g., character development, authentic leadership, resilience, perceptions and biases, power, etc.).

To facilitate other interested educators in employing this type of exercise, we have included helpful digital assets and materials as appendices. Readers can access and download these and all relevant assignment materials https://www.dropbox.com/sh/zzh3cq2151191fm/AAALZiGfpM_x9N39tCYkhBGya?dl=0. These assets will assist readers in adopting or adapting this exercise for their

own use.

Instructor preparation for the exercise is minimal. Providing students the guidance contained in Appendix A and C is all that is required. The primary concern for instructors is to clearly articulate the assignment requirements—including the selection of a mentor—after some basic concepts have been introduced, with adequate time for students to complete the assignment before the course concludes. That said, we do find that some instructor communication with the cohort of mentors is appreciated and can help ensure the intent of the exercise is met.

Step-by-Step Instructions and Possible Variations

Step 1: Select Developmental Experiences. Students must identify formative developmental experiences in their lives. In selecting their most important developmental experiences to write about, students are directed to consider how their experiences may have revealed or developed important virtues or strengths of character, or how their experiences may have challenged their perceptions, self-concept, or world-view. Alternatively, students might select experiences that altered their self-awareness, developed emotional intelligence, or resilience. Student reflection on these experiences reveals not only their knowledge of relevant course concepts, but also their self-awareness of how those events shaped their core values, purpose in life, and broader development as a leader. Students should record these developmental experiences in writing as they will be the foundation for the exercise.

Step 2: Guided Reflection. To facilitate student thought and reflection, in addition to applying course concepts, our exercise requires students to seek outside assistance in identifying developmental experiences and reflecting on those experiences. Gray (2007) points out that the practice of guided reflection during storytelling sessions yields significant advantages such as the identification of contradictions or inconsistencies, the inclusion

of other perspectives, and the exploration of self-identity. Therefore, we require students to seek out and engage with a mentor at least once before completing the paper. Mentor-protégé relationships are associated with positive outcomes including improved academic performance, positive attitudinal outcomes, and motivation to pursue goals (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008). We find face-to-face meetings are developmental experiences themselves but acknowledge that virtual meetings with mentors can also prove useful, especially if access to a mentor is limited (Knouse, 2001; Bierema & Merriam, 2002).

Student feedback over several years of using this exercise indicates that these mentoring sessions are beneficial for three reasons. First, sharing developmental experiences with a mentor increases student self-awareness as they hear how their mentor perceives and interprets the student's developmental experiences. Second, students benefit from the opportunity to be authentic and transparent with their mentor and often find that the mentor is also willing to share his or her own developmental experiences and core values. Third, mentor-protégé relationships established during this assignment often flourish well beyond the end of the academic term – providing long term benefit beyond the end of the class.

Step 3: Communicate the Journey Line Narrative. This happens twice within the context of this class- once with the mentor and once with the instructor running the course. Communication of the Journey Line Narrative with the mentor is often verbal as it often comes early in the reflection process, but we find that students who prepare notes in advance tend to have more productive conversations. Communication of the Journey Line Narrative with the instructor is via a written essay. The rubric (see Appendix B) is useful in grading this exercise.

However, acknowledging that a graded, reflective writing assignment can have its drawbacks (Reilly, 2018), we have used two variations to allow students to communicate their Journey Line Narratives to us (the teachers). The first variation removes the

requirement for students to apply OB concepts to the paper and instead places all emphasis on reflection and the articulation of core values and how those core values came to be. In a second variation of the exercise, we instruct students to use photos, images, text/words, and music with software such as PowerPoint or Prezi, or even movie software like Microsoft Movie Maker to display their journey lines visually, rather than by writing a formal paper. This second method can require students to apply OB concepts, or not. A third variation we have considered, but have yet to use personally, is to ask students to make audio recordings similar to what Eriksen (2009) describes.

Regardless of the vehicle chosen, we encourage students to consider sharing elements of their refined story with followers once they find themselves in positions of leadership – in order to reap some of the benefits associated with authentic leaders (Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Weischer, Weibler, & Petersen, 2013).

Potential Ethical Issues and Other Concerns

Given the personal nature of this assignment, we feel it prudent to provide a few cautionary notes and potential ethical concerns. Given that this exercise asks students to share experiences that have shaped their core values, instructors should be aware that some students may write about exceptionally personal and sensitive topics. For example, a student might describe his or her core value of respect and how it formed out of a history of prejudice or abuse. Another example, a student might describe his or her core value of optimism and share that the origin of that core value can be traced back to a period of depression or suicidal ideation. To address the sensitive nature of the assignment, we advise instructors to consider the following:

1. Describe confidentiality in the prompt or in class (who will read the assignment, etc.).
2. Be prepared to connect students to counseling or legal services should the

need arise.

3. Be prepared to spend longer than usual grading these assignments and providing tailored feedback.

Another concern is the availability of mentors to assist students during the assignment. While completing this assignment without the help of a mentor is still likely to be beneficial, we propose that the inclusion of a mentor adds considerable value. We have found that many students do not necessarily understand what a mentor is, so we spend time discussing mentoring with them and offer suggestions for choosing a mentor (see Appendix C, available at https://www.dropbox.com/sh/zzh3cq215119lfm/AAALZiGfpM_x9N39tCYkhBGya?dl=0). Common mentors available to undergraduates may include coaches (past or present), past work supervisors, other instructors, or leaders in the community. As we stated earlier, we prefer students meet with their mentors face-to-face, but e-mentoring (leveraging computer-mediated communication) can also be helpful.

Conclusion

This article outlines a personal Journey Line Narrative exercise that asks students to “look back” and identify their core values and purpose, as well as the formative experiences that helped solidify their values and purpose. The exercise encourages students to articulate this reflection and self-awareness to an external audience as an answer to the question, “Who am I?” This sort of reflection has been shown to contribute to authenticity in leaders (Shamir & Eilam, 2005).

Further, in both formal and informal settings, it is recommended that this exercise be accompanied by opportunities for interaction between students and a mentor. Mentor interaction in support of this reflective exercise fits with existing models of leader development, encouraging self awareness and personal growth (see Forsythe & Spencer, 2018). Additionally, it is recommended that the written

products students create in this journey line exercise be leveraged to feed subsequent reflective exercises. For example, the awareness of values and purpose achieved here is easily and importantly leveraged to feed and inform leadership philosophy development exercises (e.g., Tyran, 2017).

Across a period of more than 10 years, the authors and their colleagues have evolved this exercise as a key part of leader development initiatives in varying contexts. It is consistently cited by participants as the exercise most beneficial to enhancing students' self awareness, personal growth, and development.

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