

# ACCELERATING THE PATH TO AUTHENTICITY FOR MILLENNIALS

{ PERSPECTIVES } LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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# ACCELERATING THE PATH TO AUTHENTICITY FOR MILLENNIALS

Millennials are stepping into leadership roles at organizations around the world. Yet they lack some of the life experience needed to lead authentically. But there are steps millennials can take—and help L&D teams can provide—to embrace their authentic selves.

BY KERRY CROCE AND MARISA PLOWMAN

**MILLENNIALS MATTER.** Within the next decade, members of the millennial generation will account for more than three-quarters of the workforce as boomers transition into retirement. Some millennials have already begun taking on senior leadership roles. In the years ahead, more and more senior leaders will be millennials. Given the sheer size of their generational cohort, millennials will have a massive impact on their organizations.

What characterizes millennials? They want to build meaningful work relationships and form positive connections with colleagues. They adapt well to change, are savvy about technology, and crave continuous innovation.

Current research shows that millennials are more likely than other generations to leave their current employers and look for something better. Writing in *Forbes* (“Authenticity: The Way to the Millennial’s Heart”), Karl Moore and

Sienna Zampino suggest that millennials are restlessly searching for organizations with cultures that encourage and enable them to express their authentic selves.

Just as authentic organizations have had an edge in talent retention, authentic leaders instill loyalty and inspire engagement in their team members.

There are multiple perspectives on authenticity. For example, in her 2015 *Harvard Business Review* article “The Authenticity Paradox,” Herminia Ibarra warns that a “simplistic understanding” of authenticity can actually interfere with leaders’ growth and limit their impact. She notes, for example, that advocates of authentic leadership urge us to be true to ourselves. But “we have many selves, depending on the different roles that we play in life,” says Ibarra. “We evolve and even transform ourselves with experience in new roles.”



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But Bill George, who brought the concept of authenticity to the forefront of leadership discussions with his 2003 book *Authentic Leadership*, notes that interpreting “authentic” to mean “rigid” or “unchanging” would be a serious mistake. “This is the antithesis of authentic leaders, who are constantly developing themselves to increase self-awareness and improve relationships with others,” writes George in a recent blog post. Instead, authentic leaders undergo a lifelong development process during which they acknowledge their shortcomings and discover their capacity for self-improvement. And that includes gaining a deeper understanding of themselves through new experiences, situations, and opportunities rather than a devotion to one static “true self.”

The challenge for millennials—and the companies that depend on them to drive value in leadership roles—is that it can take *time* to develop a deep awareness and understanding of one’s self and one’s values.

Unfortunately, organizations no longer have the luxury of time. The pace of change in today’s VUCA business climate means that millennials are taking on leadership roles *now*—without necessarily having had the same opportunities, successes, and failures that leaders of previous generations had to find and define their true selves over many years. How can millennials expedite the journey to finding their authentic selves? Millennials and leadership and development (L&D) professionals need to work together to accelerate millennials’ journey to becoming authentic leaders so that they can do an effective job of helping their companies reach strategic goals.

While there are no shortcuts on the path to authenticity, we believe there *are* valuable actions that millennials can take to move toward authenticity, all of which focus on an openness to learning. Similarly, there are actions that L&D professionals can take to assist millennials along the way and help them succeed.

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## 5 Ways Millennials Can Accelerate Their Journey to Becoming Authentic Leaders

### 1 Develop both self-awareness and awareness of others

Authentic leaders are honest with themselves about their strengths and skills, as well as areas where they should focus to improve relationships and performance. They not only excel at managing their own emotions, but they also are adept at recognizing and understanding their colleagues’ emotions, which helps them manage relationships and build trust. Authentic leaders exercise their duties with humility. They take the time to understand the people around them, displaying not just tolerance and understanding but also making an effort to empathize with others. In “The Focused Leader” (*Harvard Business Review*, December 2013), Daniel Goleman draws the link between self-awareness and cognitive control, which he says “enables executives to pursue a goal despite distractions and

setbacks.” Goleman also notes that leaders who learn to focus their attention both internally and externally simultaneously strengthen their emotional intelligence. It takes time and effort to find the balance between authenticity and cognitive control.

#### TIPS

##### TAKE TIME TO PAUSE AND REFLECT

Ask yourself, “What am I feeling? What is driving me right now? What outcome am I trying to achieve? What is the ripple effect of my actions on others?”

##### BE INQUISITIVE

Ask questions to truly understand others. Learn about how they think, feel, and experience life. Ask about their background and what makes them unique.

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## 2 Pay close attention to physical presence

In some ways, millennials are highly skilled at communication. They have grown up in a world filled with emails, texts, tweets, and video chats. Yet these skills are a double-edged sword—many millennials are so immersed in the digital world that their in-person communication skills have taken a back seat. A good communicator practices active listening, provides feedback, and ensures that the conversational flow includes give and take from all sides. Communication has both verbal and nonverbal components. Muriel Wilkins, coauthor of *Own the Room*, says that good communicators know how to manage their energy levels. In an interview for *Harvard ManageMentor*<sup>®</sup>, Wilkins told us, “It’s not as easy as remembering to stand up straight or stop frowning.

You need to match your energy to the situation. For instance, if you smile too encouragingly at an employee presenting a new idea, she might wonder if you’re taking her seriously.”

### TIPS

#### BE COGNIZANT OF YOUR PRESENCE

How do you typically sit, stand, and engage with others? Do you regularly make eye contact? When in doubt, record yourself or ask for feedback from a trusted peer or mentor.

#### ALIGN YOUR ONLINE AND OFF-LINE SELVES

Your efforts to present yourself as a credible and mature leader could be compromised if your public Facebook page is filled with photos of you drinking tequila shots on a party cruise. Aim for more congruence between your home and work identities.

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## 3 Harness a learning mind-set that encompasses self, others, and the world

As we noted earlier, Bill George describes authentic leaders as people who are constantly trying to develop themselves and improve their capabilities. This commitment to constant self-improvement dovetails nicely with Carol Dweck’s work on growth mind-sets. As discussed in a 2014 *Harvard Business Review* article, Dweck and her colleagues found that companies with a growth mind-set tended to have happier, more committed employees who felt more valued by their organizations. Employees at growth mind-set organizations felt less scared of failure, and so they were more willing to pursue the sort of bold, innovative projects that companies need to drive future growth.

### TIPS

#### PUT YOURSELF IN SOMEONE ELSE’S SHOES

Challenge your own views of the world and what you believe to be right and wrong. Accept individual differences by understanding that many value judgments are in the eye of the beholder. Seek out conversations with new people with whom you don’t usually get to interact.

#### RECOGNIZE EFFORT AS WELL AS RESULTS

As a leader, if you praise only your star performers, you could end up discouraging everyone else from taking the risks that companies ultimately need to drive future innovation. Pay close attention to your language, and be sure you are giving positive reinforcement to employees who are learning, growing, innovating, collaborating, and embodying the ideals of a growth mind-set.

#### GIVE AND RECEIVE FEEDBACK

A critical part of developing a learning mind-set is being open to giving and receiving feedback. Candor and transparency are vital to leading authentically.



Millennials must embrace a growth mind-set to take worthwhile risks.

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## 4 Lean into discomfort and take risks

Millennials love being part of a team and tend to be incredibly risk-averse. This is the generation that grew up playing sports in leagues where everyone went home with trophies just for showing up. There is comfort and security in being part of a group. You can share the credit for triumphs and collectively bear the shame of defeat. Nonetheless, millennials should be encouraged to strike out on their own and take individual risks. It is natural to fear failure, but personal failings can be highly educational, prompting self-reflection, putting a damper on overconfidence, and encouraging the sort of maturity that is a prerequisite for the development of the authentic self.

### TIPS

#### FAIL ON PURPOSE

In the world of exercise and strength building, the saying is “No pain, no gain.” When it comes to developing as an authentic leader, that could be rephrased “No pain, no growth.” Taking on risks is uncomfortable, and failure is no fun, but the sooner you fall, the sooner you can get back up. If you’re terrified of failure, you’ll always choose the safest and most conservative option, and in the long run, that can be the riskiest strategy of all.

#### LEARN FROM YOUR FAILURES

There’s no point failing if you’re just going to repeat the same mistakes over and over. Instead, take the time to reflect and learn from your mistakes. Failure can be painful and humiliating, but it also helps us learn to cope with life’s challenges. Victory is that much sweeter after we have tasted defeat. Each failure that we overcome propels us closer to discovering and becoming our authentic selves.

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## 5 Network purposefully and thoughtfully

Millennials are accustomed to the idea of having hundreds or even thousands of connections on social networks like Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram. In a workplace environment, however, millennials must learn that quality matters more than quantity. Instead of building a gargantuan business network, millennials should prioritize meaningful connections with mentors and peers who can offer guidance and support. In her *Harvard Business Review* article “5 Misconceptions about Networking,” Ibarra notes the importance of networking despite negative preconceptions and suggests that we force ourselves to dive in and give networking our best shot. By stepping out of our comfort zone to build diverse networks with dissimilar people who will challenge our views and help us broaden our worldview, we can experience firsthand its value for ourselves, our teams, and our companies.



Millennials need to step out of their comfort zone to build diverse networks.

### TIPS

#### RECONNECT WITH PEOPLE WHEN THERE IS NOTHING IN IT FOR YOU

Reach out to people in your network to check in on what is going on in their lives. Be curious. Ask questions. Use work anniversaries and birthdays as opportunities to check in with your contacts while celebrating their milestones.

#### BE A “SUPERCONNECTOR”

By serving as a catalyst to bring people together, you will learn a great deal about other people and find commonalities even amid diversity.

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# 4 Four Ways to Help Millennials Become Authentic Leaders More Quickly

## 1 Help millennials find their purpose

As millennials assume leadership roles, they want to know how their role relates to the company's mission, vision, values, and standards. L&D professionals can help by showing millennials how their responsibilities fit into the big picture. Through explanation and open discussion, L&D professionals can help millennials connect their personal stories with the key strategic initiatives they are tasked with accomplishing.

### TIPS

#### TAKE ADVANTAGE OF ORIENTATION AND ONBOARDING PROGRAMS

Use these programs to give millennials a clear sense of your company's purpose, mission, values, and goals. This will allow millennials to figure out how their actions and responsibilities fit into the big picture and help imbue their work with meaning.

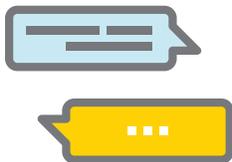
#### ENCOURAGE EXPERIMENTATION

Encourage and inspire millennials to wake up each morning and try something new. Support millennials as they experiment and try new opportunities as long as their experimentation aligns with the organization's strategy and goals.

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## 2 Support millennials' tendencies to connect and collaborate

As a generation, millennials have been raised with a steady diet of positive feedback. They want to feel valued and appreciated. They like to be included in discussions. Even if they don't know the answers, they're generally eager to participate in the search for solutions. Millennials view the world as a place where communities come together to solve problems. They thrive on collaboration and dialogue. It's up to L&D professionals to channel these natural generational tendencies into productive avenues that will help millennials grow more quickly into authentic leaders.



Millennials thrive on collaboration and dialogue.

### TIPS

#### TRY REVERSE MENTORING

As Jeanne Meister and Karie Willyerd have shown in their *Harvard Business Review* article "Mentoring Millennials," the practice of pairing millennial mentors with older executives can have multiple benefits. Millennials can share their knowledge on specific practices (e.g., using social media to connect with customers) where they may have more expertise, while learning from their older mentees about what it really takes to run the business. In effect, the mentoring relationship becomes a two-way street where each side learns valuable lessons from the other.

#### FACILITATE GROUP COACHING

Coaching is an effective process for supporting personal growth and self-awareness. Adding the group component allows leaders to learn *from* and *with* others as well.

#### ENCOURAGE MOBILITY

Look for ways to expose millennials to other cultures and parts of the business through rotational assignments and job sharing.

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### 3 Show millennials the benefits of engaging in mindfulness and reflection

Staying focused and present despite interruptions can be a challenge for anyone, especially millennials who have grown up in a 24/7 world filled with endless streams of digital distractions competing for their attention. L&D professionals can help millennials develop strategies to make space and time for education through meditation, reflection, and deliberate focus. Here's some good news for L&D pros hoping to convince millennials to take a deep breath and put down their smartphones for a moment—research published in 2014 by J. Walter Thompson Intelligence found that millennials were not only the most distracted U.S. generational cohort but also the generation most interested in learning how to shut out distractions and improve their focus. With help from L&D professionals, millennials can achieve mindfulness, which goes hand in hand with self-awareness and ultimately leads toward authenticity.

#### TIPS

##### ENCOURAGE POST-MEETING REFLECTION

Ask millennials to adopt a practice of taking a five-minute walk between meetings. Encourage them to notice and appreciate their surroundings, say hello to a colleague, grab a bottle of water or a cup of coffee. There should be a no-technology rule during these walks—no emails or texts! Instead, millennials can use the time to reflect on and internalize insights from the last meeting before starting on the next one.

##### PROMPT MILLENNIALS TO ENGAGE IN SELF-ANALYSIS

Incorporate introspective questions into your L&D programs. Ask millennials to consider questions such as: What are my values as a leader? How do my words reinforce—or conflict—with those values? In what areas am I doing well? What are the areas where I have room for improvement?

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### 4 Connect with millennials on their own terms

In a recent *Fortune* article, Raymond Carvey, executive vice president, Corporate Learning at Harvard Business Publishing, observes that tech-savvy millennials were “born into a connected world.” As such, they're lifelong learners, engaging with content and new ideas in real time through social media, peer networks, and more. He suggests engaging millennials through the technology with which they're comfortable, in a number of different modalities.

#### TIPS

##### PROVIDE BOTH “PUSH” AND “PULL” LEARNING

Offer what Carvey calls the “mobile, self-paced, high-quality, and on-demand” content millennials are more used to, then drive home important concepts with longer and more structured lessons.

##### ENABLE KNOWLEDGE SHARING VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

Use social media platforms to enable millennials to share knowledge with diverse leaders at all levels across your organization. Giving them the opportunity to serve as a resource to other leaders keeps millennials engaged in learning throughout a program while also driving the retention necessary to truly develop as an authentic leader.

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Millennials are highly motivated to learn and develop into strong, authentic leaders. They just need some help making sure that their authentic leadership skills advance at the same pace as their career trajectory. With mindfulness, curiosity, awareness, and assistance from L&D professionals, they can accelerate their journey to becoming the authentic leaders that their organizations need.



Millennials can accelerate their journey to becoming the authentic leaders that their organizations need.

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