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Someday I Will Change the World: Creating Youth Change Agents through Leadership Training

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**Someday I Will Change the World: Creating Youth Change Agents through Leadership
Training**

Colin Keady

University of Arkansas

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

No research currently exists on a leadership development program for secondary students that features project-based learning and connection with change agents. This project seeks to create a program that lives in that gap – informing a new generation with a modern method of leadership instruction. Through a one day conference, participating students should experience personal and professional growth. Not only will they grow in their communication, motivation, and managerial skills – but they will also put together a plan of action for when the conference concludes. Students will use this plan to address an issue in their city, county, or state – putting their new founded leadership abilities to use. The hope exists that this project will create a more modern, new method of leadership instruction for the Generation Z audience.

Introduction

Background and Need

Leadership development has been a point of emphasis in all facets of society. From the collegiate scholar programs of the 1970s to the entire industry built around corporate coaching and executive training programs of today, leadership development has spread to all levels of the workplace (Guthrie et al., 2018). Leadership development is specifically defined as the expansion of one's leadership traits, abilities, and behaviors through training in hopes of improving leadership capacity. Secondary students have a plethora of leadership development programs hosted by both their educational institution and external organizations. Some of these programs, such as the American Legion's Boys States and Boys Nation, have become nationally renowned with famous alumni. Other programs are hosted by secondary (high) schools, usually in conjunction with external organizations or niche groups aligning with students' interests. A 2011 study concluded 97% of students expressed a positive impact from their involvement in a youth development program (Reever, 2011). These programs offer unique opportunities to secondary students and have become an important experience in the development of youth leaders. These skills, which are greatly applicable to the workplace, highly mirror Northouse's traits of an effective leader: intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability (Northouse, 2019).

However, a gap within the research exists regarding a specific method of leadership curriculum development. Few programs, if any, use a comprehensive project-based curriculum to heighten the connection to higher-order concepts about leadership development (Sarraz, 2017). These programs may use elements of project-based learning, but instead opt for primarily theory-based instruction. Project-based learning (PBL) refers to a pedagogy involving students

acquiring knowledge through the exploration of hands-on problem solving (Prince & Felder, 2007). Specifically involving students developing their leadership skills through the actual act of leading and generating solutions to issues (PBL), has been implemented in select programs (Ray, 2016). Programs such as Boys Nation, where students participate in running for political office, have some elements of PBL present (Nelson, 2004). Some research has been conducted on leadership development programs that are focused on developing participants' skills through the process of PBL, but the research has yet to become prevalent in the United States at the secondary level. Within the research also exists a gap in evaluating the immediate consequences of participation in such programs. Students participating in current leadership programs are a part of Generation Z, starting at approximately the turn of the 21st century (Swan, 2021). Research on secondary leadership development has been conducted largely on participants within the first years of Generation Z or before.

A substantial portion of this project will focus on the movement of “change” and the existence of “change agents” in communities. Change is defined as the movement towards solving a problem (Havelock et al., 1995). Therefore, a change agent is someone who seeks to bring about change in an organization, group, etc. in a deliberate manner. This project refers to change agents as the policymakers, industry professionals, or community leaders able to assist with creating change.

Problem Statement

Many leadership development programs include theory from the 20th century (Northhouse, 2016), potentially causing stagnation while some use different approaches for constructing curriculum. Many programs fail to provide substantive curriculum based on any leadership theory, with national organizations such as the Hugh O’Brian Youth Leadership

(HOBY) programs making the change within the last decade (Ray, 2016). Some of these revised HOBY Leadership programs, have experienced challenges when implementing theories, by overcomplicating theories and using complex models (Harris & Beckert, 2018). As the research on secondary leadership development programs is limited, further research is needed to improve our understanding of such programs. Participants face another issue: the limited opportunity to translate their gained skills into their home communities. Without a tangible connection to industry professionals, policymakers, or community leaders, participants struggle to make immediate impacts after returning from their programs. Previous research suggests having participants connect with trained facilitators increased the effectiveness of the program (Hamdorf, 2013). Research has also struggled to measure program impacts after facilitation, limiting the known effectiveness of current curriculum (Gurdjian et al, 2014). This leaves room for future research to incorporate leadership theory, project-based learning, increased connection with facilitators and appropriate change agents, paired with program evaluation.

Purpose Statement

This project sought to train effective youth leaders through the development of a leadership curriculum and a leadership-training program. Specific emphasis was placed on developing PBL curriculum and establishing relationships between participants and change agents. The project intended to add to the body of leadership curriculum and learn more about the connection between leadership development participants and tangible pathways to generating change. This project also sought to inform future designs of leadership development curricula.

Objectives

This project had four main objectives: (1) Conduct a comprehensive literature review to establish the leadership development best practices; (2) Create a series of leadership

development curriculum modules; and (3) Develop a one-day leadership development seminar with secondary students interested in developing their leadership skills.

Literature Review

Leadership development is a common topic that exists in multiple facets such as academic and work-place contexts. To explore the topic of leadership development, one must review the history of leadership development before identifying future steps. In the context of this research, it is important to understand the unique aspects to the literature and the future methodology. The literature review is organized thematically. The topic of leadership development curriculum, as it currently stands, highlights the most important information for understanding. Topics such as project-based learning and Generation Z add fundamental information to the design of this research and its instrumentation.

Leadership Development Curriculum

Leadership development programs are a billion-dollar industry in the United States alone, with great variation in the theories, methods, and activities used to educate (Westfall, 2019). Over the past 30 years, the leadership theories disseminated through development curriculum have greatly changed (Day, 2014). Previous theories were constructed around the idea of “what” leadership is and how it can be defined. The approach consisted of instruction on the tenets of what a leader is and what effective leadership looks like. Examples and case studies served as the preferred instruction methods, as they held evidentiary merit. As time progressed, many leadership development programs have shifted to focus on the “how” of leadership. Newer programs explored the idea of how a leader develops, grows, and interacts (Day, 2014). This differentiation occurred out of industry need. Business professions sought to not only develop effective leaders, but effective leadership development programs and practices. Day (2000) also discussed this concept in other research associated with workplace leadership. Leadership development has explored the conceptual versus practice context. Specifically, the conceptual

context has explored how leadership should be cultivated based on researched theories. Practice context has become more recent, as leadership is now shown to be developed through actual practice and training (Day, 2000).

Another aspect of leadership development curriculum in the body of research is the specific ‘soft skills’ that programs seek to develop. Soft skills refer to the attributes allowing someone to interact with and operate alongside others (Rao, 2014). Many of the ‘soft skills’ align with Cashman’s Mastery of Leadership. Cashman’s skills include consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, and citizenship (Ray, 2016). These values have been shown to be the basis of the curriculum for the HOBY Leadership Conference. Other researched programs highlighted different skills, such as self-efficacy, stress-management and problem-solving skills (Lucas & Goodman, 2015).

Project-based Learning

PBL, sometimes referred to as problem-based learning in the context of leadership development, is defined as pedagogy involving students acquiring knowledge through the exploration of hands-on problem solving (Prince & Felder, 2007). This educational philosophy has been previously used in leadership contexts and supported through research. In the case of implementation in through secondary education, the research shows that PBL was successful among adult populations (Bridges & Hallinger, 1995). The philosophy has also been researched among student leaders, exploring the effectiveness among different populations. In a study of students building robots to solve problems, students reported their experience improved their problem-solving, ability to share power, and conflict resolution skills (Cain & Cocco, 2013). When exploring student leadership in a technical capacity, findings supported that student participants in PBL developed skill sets through their experiences. Students reported

improvements in their communication, goal-setting, and overall leadership skills (Walters & Sirotiak, 2011). In a leadership course setting, undergraduate participants reported experiencing a greater sense of meaning in their lives through the development of their leadership skills. Students also reported a decrease in their positive relationships with classmates (Lucas & Goodman, 2015). This decrease in meaningful relationships occurred through multiple years of participation in the course, with the researchers suggesting the stress experienced by students as a potential cause.

Generation Z

It is important to understand the generational theories behind the population being explored. Secondary students, aged 14-18, fall under Generation Z, also referred to as IGen in some academic contexts. Generation theory postulates that individuals born from the mid 1990s through 2000 generally mark the start of Generation Z (Swan, 2021). The generation has been found to be more confident, assertive, and entitled than previous generations (Swan, 2021). The largest defining characteristic of the generation is the encompassing existence of technology in the development period of generational members (Swan, 2021). Another aspect of researched theory states Gen Z has been largely impacted by the post-2000s world (Swan, 2021). The high level of resources and wealth have encouraged the generation to behave differently. These generational members have elected to live slower lives than previous generations, influencing their delay in participating in adult-like activities such as driving, forming romantic relationships, and starting careers (Twenge, 2017).

These topics serve as the basis for how the current study was conducted. The current leadership curricula served as a successful starting point for new research, since student participants benefit greatly from their participation (Reever, 2011). PBL shows promising

opportunities in future research, given its success in prior studies among different populations (Bridges & Hallinger, 1995). The culmination of this previous research reveals the possibility of connecting these researched ideas and creating a modified leadership development program for Generation Z populations.

The learning styles of Generation Z become particularly important when designing leadership development curriculum. Overall, the generation prefers substantive content and value over excess and frills (Selingo, 2021). Generation Z is also highly focused on relationships, and the impact mentoring can have. Allowing for the creation of meaningful connections will cater to the connection style of the generation targeted (Selingo, 2021). Finally, Generation Z Students are looking for ways to connect with social communities. Creating PBL opportunities with meaningful connections and a social application, as this project seeks to develop, should cater to the intended audience.

Development Plan

After attending multiple leadership development conferences through my secondary and post-secondary education, the impact these seminars present can be prolific. Through personal experiences, these conferences take a litany of issues through multiple strategies and tactics. This creative project was sparked as combining the best elements identified through a literature review and experience. Every leadership development program seeks to be more impactful than the last, in an attempt to create agents of change. This project will refer to agents of change or change agents at times, specifically referencing mentors assisting with the program. These individuals are community leaders, business professionals, or policy makers that can help facilitate growth in participating students. As individuals with substantive influence and knowledge, their role is to help students leave the program with a plan of action. Through personal research with my mentor, the program designed in this creative project seeks to be the way forward using a new method of leadership development with secondary students.

The Agricultural Education, Communication, and Technology (AECT) Department at the University of Arkansas has previously hosted leadership conference called, “Razorback Leadership Academy”. These conferences served as a baseline for designing the conference. Razorback Leadership Academy (RLA), was a one-day conference for aspiring leaders in Arkansas secondary schools. The program discussed in this project will retain the name and the hosting department.

The conference designed for this project is a one-day leadership seminar for high school juniors and sophomores in Northwest Arkansas. School counselors and principals nominate students. After nomination, students complete a questionnaire prior to conference attendance. Participants will be required to provide basic demographic and contact information. Also

included in the form will be a required open-response question relating to issues facing local communities. Students will have the opportunity to discuss issues they would like to address in their cities, counties, and state. While it is not initially revealed to the students, they will be paired with a policymaker, community leader, or business professional who is an expert in a related field to the issue they would like to address. These individuals are referred to as “change agents” and are an integral part of the leadership development process. During the conference, participants will be mentored by these change agents to develop a plan of action. While the participants are growing their technical skills, these conversations with change agents will allow them to put together an actionable plan to enact after leaving the conference to address an identified issue. The instruction methods and overall focus on the program align with the desires of Generation Z. By creating intentional curriculum that fosters meaningful relationships through social activity and creating value – this program should allow for meaningful development among the intended audience (Selingo, 2021).

Students will begin the day with a short introduction of the conference by myself and supporting faculty from the AECT Department. The introduction should include a short summary of the events of the day, the purpose of the conference itself, and information about the AECT Department and Agricultural Leadership program. The introduction should last no more than 15 minutes. Following the conclusion of the introduction, participating students will engage in an icebreaker activity to become familiar with their cohort. The icebreaker selected for the conference will be called “Hot Takes” and allows students to express issues they are passionate about. No materials besides a prior list of questions will be required. Students will be presented with an argument. Should they agree with the argument, they will congregate on one side of the room. Students with the opposing viewpoint will go to the other side of the room,

with no student allowed to be undecided on the topic. Once everyone is on their respective sides, a few minutes will be allowed to discuss the topic in the agree and disagree groups. After this time lapses, students will be invited to share their perspectives. After one side shares, allow a student from the other side to rebuttal. Continue this for 2 times, then move on to the next topic. Suggested topics would be, “Water is wet,” “Vanilla Ice Cream is better than Chocolate,” or “Trucks are better than Cars.” These topics should be understandable to a general audience, with most individuals having some thoughts or opinions on the topic. Continue providing topics until 15 minutes has lapsed.

The substantive part of the conference will begin with an introduction of leadership. Centered around Northouse’s definition of leadership, students will be instructed on the fundamental parts of leadership theory: how it is a process, how influence occurs, and the importance of common goals (Northouse, 2017). While steeped in researched theory, these topics will be presented on the level of a secondary student – making them easily understandable to participants at the conference. Students are also introduced to the concept of leaders versus managers, and how both have relevancy in a leadership setting (Northouse, 2017). Participants are then prompted to participate in a guessing game, being provided situations and then must select if it is leadership or managership. This brief instruction will conclude with the True Colors Assessment. This assessment has been used for over 40 years in all areas of leadership development (True Colors International, 2023). The assessment uses colors to describe participants spectrum (likeness with attributes of each color). The attributes describe personality and leadership styles. Results can assist participants with more information related to their conflict resolution styles, teamwork habits, and overall improvement to one’s professional, academic, and personal life (True Colors International, 2023). This portion of the seminar will be

led by Dr. Rucker, a certified facilitator of the True Colors assessment. Since this portion of the program is conducted by a trained facilitator, no professional materials from the True Colors organization are included. After students finish the assessment and all related elements, they will transition to a group discussion. Students will be split into groups at random, and have an AECT student serve as a facilitator for their discussion. The first round of discussion will last approximately 30 minutes. This time will be used to debrief what has been learned thus far at the seminar. Questions will specifically be pointed to encourage students to further explore their True Colors results among their peers.

Students will then transition to their first meeting with their change agent. These pairing will be selected based on a student's interest in issues facing their community. These individuals could be policymakers, industry professionals, or community leaders. For example, a State Representative, business executive, and volunteer coordinator would all count as a change agent. This time will be used to facilitate a connection with their change agent and start generating ideas for how to address their selected issues. Change agents will facilitate the conversations and develop a working relationship to openly discuss ideas. While this time should only last 30 minutes, it will set up the culmination of the program. These initial conversations will help the students create their eventual plan of action to return into their community with. Students should begin to think about the issue they are wanting to solve and have some ideas brainstormed. This period will also allow for the change agents to also discuss their careers and areas of expertise. The main objective for this time is for paired students to feel comfortable to openly share ideas and learn. Students will then break for lunch.

After lunch, the students will return to the large group. An external speaker will be brought into the conference to assist with the growth of those participating. The speaker will

address topics of service, responsibility, and motivation. Essentially, the speaker will build upon the topics discussed during the conference in a motivational way. The goal of the speaker's presentation is to energize students about going back into their communities to be leaders. Students will enter a period of 30 minutes with the AECT student facilitator, previously worked with for the debrief, and peers to discuss the speaker. Much like the previous time spent with their peers, the goal of this time is to grow in their personal skills and network. AECT student facilitators will be given more freedom during this session to facilitate the conversation based upon the speaker. These facilitators will still be given prompted questions but will have more time to steer towards the conversations of their individual group. While these students are not receiving direct training, students selected are former participants in leadership seminars themselves: with some possibly having direct facilitation experience.

Students will now begin the final part of the seminar, working directly with their change agent to create an actionable plan. Change agents will take the ideas expressed and help the students create goals, actions, and targets for implementation in their communities. Those ideas brainstormed earlier in the day, mixed with their new skills, will create opportunities for service. Once students create the plan, they will transition their ideas onto a large sheet of paper to present to the other participants. Reporting out will force students to elaborate on their ideas and articulate their plans. Presenters will also receive questions from participants and others at the seminar: helping them further solidify their plans. Students should be able to take their own plans, or another participant's plan, and have a general course of action for how to address a specific issue in their community. Plans should include allies on the issue, short-term goals, long-term goals, and a general timeline of steps to work towards addressing the issue. This will conclude the substantive part of the conference. The coordinators will wrap up all items, thank

participants, and administer a brief survey. Participants can be followed up with to administer the success of their action plan. Participants after this program will be followed up with after 6 months to discuss the effectiveness of their community action plans.

Design Process and Creative Works

The conference can be implemented through simple steps. Following the general outline of the conference described, one could host a conference with a similar intent. The materials included allow for easy application with a schedule, introductory presentation, and general-purpose information. This project does not serve as an exact step-by-step guide, by design. The conference materials are designed with the intent of being administered to secondary students. This leadership program should be fundamentally different if hosted to a different audience, depending on age, previous knowledge, and location. Since this conference plan has never been tested before, changes or alterations should be made based on the summative evaluation.

Once one has hosted the leadership conference, feedback collection is important. This information allows for future improvement to leadership development, and direct feedback on the activities. Students should be administered these questionnaires immediately after the conference has concluded. Questions should be asked about the effectiveness of the leadership development program. The appendix reflects a sample list of questions that could be asked. These questions are based on previous leadership development studies (Ray, 2016), questioning the previous skills improved by participants in other leadership seminars. Questions were also included as a direct comparison to other leadership programs. For students who have previously participated in these development programs, these questions allow participants to compare and contrast the effectiveness of the program. These other programs will serve as baseline comparison for the effectiveness of the development curriculum. The feedback received should be implemented in future programs to improve the effectiveness of the curriculum and overall experience of participants.

Conclusions and Discussion

The aim of this project was to create a new method of leadership development curriculum. By combining already successful and researched methods, with the twist of generating relationships with experts, this project could serve as the new method forward for leadership development programs. Instruction on leadership is typically carried out at all levels, but ensuring participants have the pathways and connections necessary to be an agent of change is the primary project goal. Leadership development programs I have participated in do a satisfactory job of boosting confidence and motivating. While that boost is helpful, simply motivating does not create a pathway for change. By being intentional about the student's experience in the program, they are paired with a mentor to help them create change. Students come into the program with an issue they want to solve and leave with a plan of action. Secondary students are often limited in their official capacity to be an agent of change. This project seeks to empower the next generation of leaders.

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Appendix A

Conference Schedule

- 7:45 Setup and arrival
- 8:00 Conference Start & introductions
- 8:05 Ice Breaker
- 8:20 “Leadership? What is it?” [Presentation]
- 8:50 True Colors Assessment Intro
- 9:05 Assessment
- 9:30 Sorting of Colors
- 10:00 Report out to the group
- 10:45 Color Blended Activity
- 11:30 Final Breakdown
- 11:50 First Team Breakout
- 12:10 Meeting with Change Agent
- 12:30 Lunch
- 1:00 Return as group, how to bring home your skills (Speaker)
- 1:40 Second Team Breakout
- 2:00 Meet with Change Agent 2
- 3:00 Present Idea/Plan to entire group
- 3:25 Wrap Up & survey

Appendix B

Leadership Presentation

What is LEADERSHIP?
Razorback Leadership Academy

What does leadership mean to you?

Who is a leader you admire?

"Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal."
—Peter G. Northouse

WHAT DOES ANY OF THAT MEAN?

- Process**: Not a trait or characteristic, but a series of events
- Influence**: Without influence and guidance, leadership does not exist
- Common goals**: Having a common goal creates mutual purpose and incentive for followers

Nelson Mandela

Process: Fought for civil rights in South Africa, spent 27 years in prison for his beliefs, eventually became the president of South Africa

Influence: Used his platform to advance ideas of unity and progress

Common Goals: Wanted equality in S.A. and others bought in



Sara Blakely

Process: Started Spanks to help other women, now one of the wealthiest woman alive

Influence: Treated her employees like family, created a product to solve an issue

Common Goals: Encouraged personal investment from her employees, and rewarded them when they succeeded



Sam Walton


Process: Started the largest physical retailer in Walmart, and eventually Sam's Club

Influence: Used scale to drive down costs to make items more affordable

Common Goals: Help people save money to live better


LEADER VS. MANAGER

Leadership is change and movement - Management is order and consistency









LEADER VS. MANAGER

- Similar, but different
 - Similarities
 - Working with people
 - Achieving goals
 - Leadership
 - More focused on culture and progress
 - All about change
 - Management
 - More focused on tangible operations
 - All about basic organization

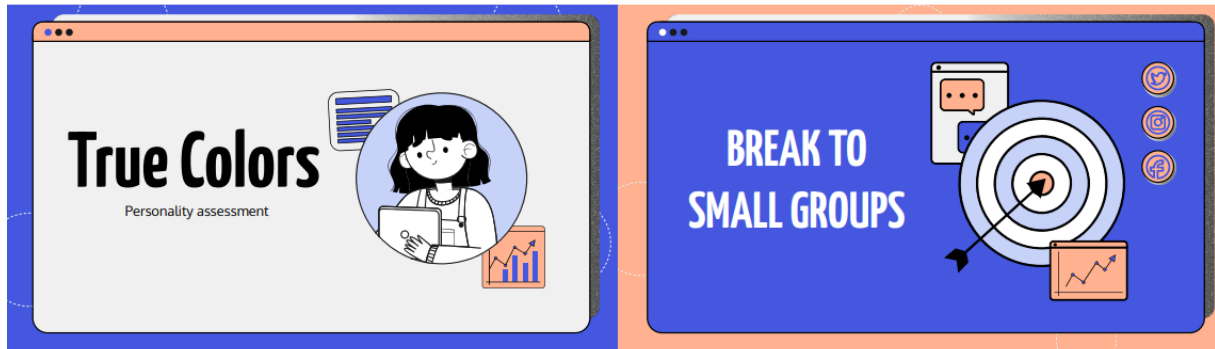


GUESS WHICH IS LEADERSHIP VS MANAGEMENT

 Creating Agendas Management	 Inspiring Followers Leadership	 Creating Vision Leadership
 Create Rules Management	 Problem-Solving Both	 Ensuring Success Both

SO WHAT NOW?





Notes

- Speak slowly and clearly
- Take group answers during prompts
- On open prompts, take approx.. 5 responses
- Have students guess which description is leader vs manager
- Allow the trained facilitator to lead on True Colors

Appendix C

Group Activity 1 Discussion Questions:

- What is your definition of leadership?
- When was a time you exhibited leadership?
- Who is a leader you admire?
- Have you been around a poor leader before? What was that like?
- What traits should a leader exhibit?
- Which characteristics of your color do you think accurately describe you?
- Are there any traits you disagree with?
- What are your color's strengths?
- What makes you feel successful or satisfied?

Group Activity 2 Discussion Questions:

- What did the speaker say that stands out to you?
- What leadership roles do you currently hold? How have you improved as a leader while in these roles?
- How can you take what you are learning here today and apply it to your leadership positions today and in the future?
- Final thoughts and observations about today's conference?

GUIDE

- Create a strong initial environment

- Establish expectations of the group participating
- Energize the group during discussion
- Manage participation and ensure all are included
- Adjust based on student's participation
- Steer conversations towards pertinent topics

Appendix D

Survey After-participation Questions

How do you describe leadership?

What are the top 3 qualities in a leader?

How would you rate the experience of participating in this conference?

- 1 to 5 (Very Poor to Excellent)

If you have participated in a previous leadership conference, how did this experience compare?

- 1 to 5 (Do not prefer to Highly prefer)

Did you experience any growth of benefits from your participation in the program?

- If yes, what were they?

Did you experience growth in your leadership skills?

- 1 to 5 (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

Who was your student facilitator?

How would you rate your student facilitator?

- 1 to 5 (Very poor to Excellent)

Do you have any additional comments about your student facilitator?

Who was your adult facilitator?

How would rate your adult facilitator?

- 1 to 5 (Very poor to excellent)

Did the presence of an adult facilitator improve your ability to create an action plan?

- 1 to 5 (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

Do you have an additional comments about your adult facilitator?

Will you implement your action plan after leading this conference?

- Open-ended

Did you have a preferred activity/lesson/workshop?

- If yes, what was it?

How can this conference improve going forward?

- Open-ended

Final comments

- Open-ended

APPENDIX EAction Plan Template

Overall Goal:

Objectives (Short & Long Term):

Tasks (Should align with objectives):

Success Criteria (How will you measure the effectiveness):

Time Frame (When will this occur):