



**Executive Education**  
OWEN GRADUATE SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

**Ask More Questions**

“Because I’ve been a college professor for almost 20 years, I think I know millennials pretty well. In many ways they’re different than us, but in probably more ways, they’re very similar to us.”



An Interview with Brian Griffith, Assistant Clinical Professor of Human and Organizational Behavior at Vanderbilt University

Griffith, who teaches an *Emerging Leaders* program and collaborates on a *Leading Millennials* program for Vanderbilt's Executive Education, acknowledges that for boomers in leadership positions, leading and working with millennial employees can sometimes be "daunting." "Sometimes our millennial employees know a lot more than we do in certain areas, specifically technology," he says. "They're technology natives, as we refer to them, and they also have different values."

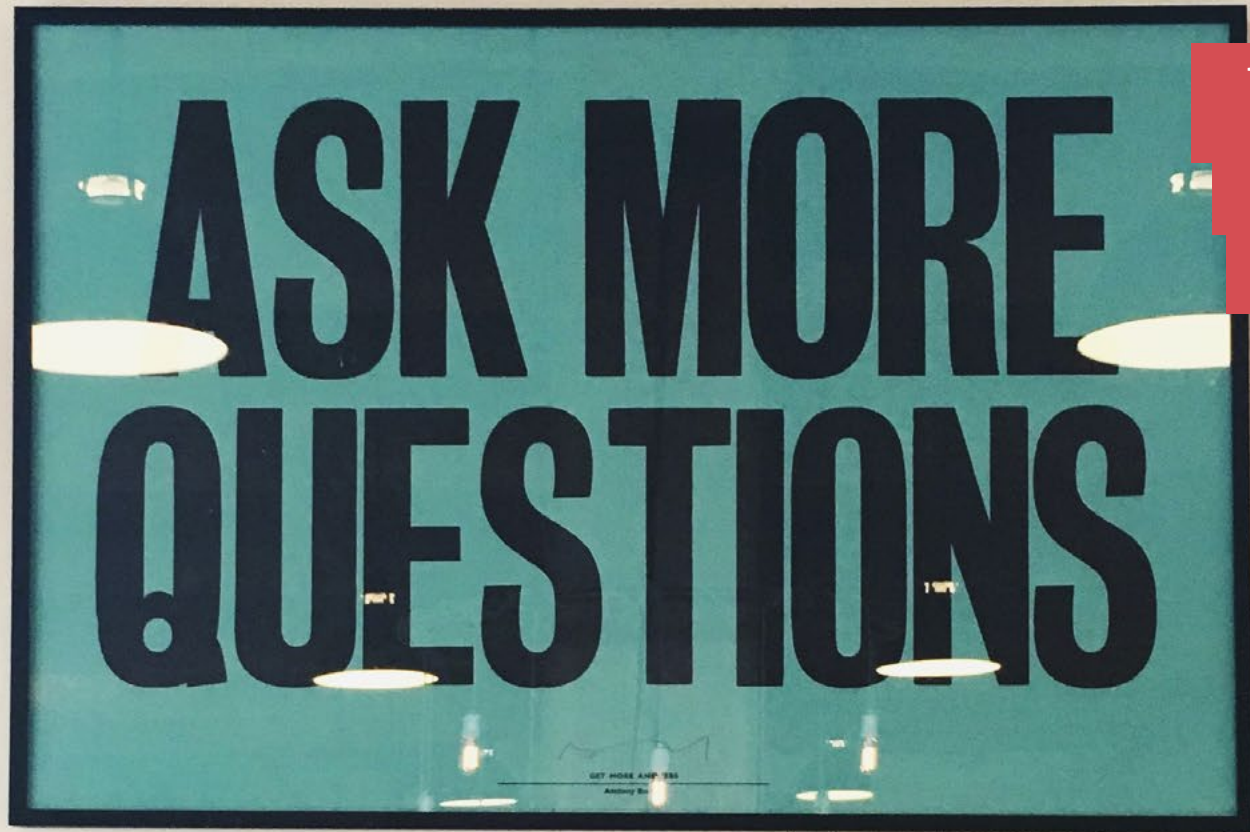
One of those values is refusing to blindly accept directives, Griffith says. "We tell our millennials to do this project a certain way and they'll say, 'Well, why? Why do I have to do it that way?'" This constant questioning can frustrate boomers who, he says, "are not used to being questioned because in many cases we didn't question our managers, or our parents, or superiors when we were kids." However, leaders are mistaken when they interpret

the questioning as just youthful rebellion. "In fact, that's just one of the ways that millennials learn," Griffith says. "They want to understand the whys behind what we're asking them to do. And in most cases, that's totally appropriate."

## *Personalizing Training*

Leadership is just one area Griffith has focused on in his long career at Vanderbilt. He has also conducted significant research in the area of teams, "trying to understand how teams work together, team dynamics, team performance," he says. A third area of expertise is assessment. His focus in this area, he says, is "learning how to take inventory of a person's strengths and weaknesses, and help them transform that knowledge into personal development."





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In a unique value-added complement to its *Business Essentials* online learning program, Vanderbilt Executive Education offers a premium package for participating companies and organizations that includes Griffith's in-depth 360-degree feedback survey. Based on the survey results — the survey is distributed in the student's workplace — the student creates a personal development plan that is evaluated by Owen professors.

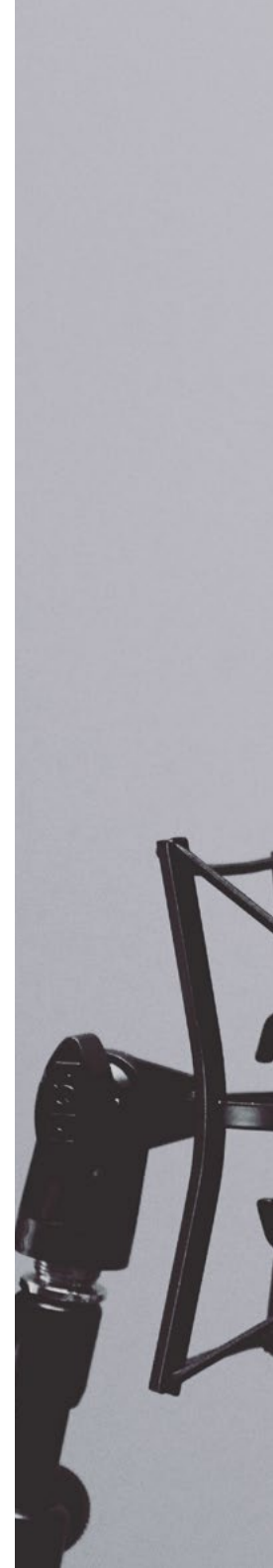
The 360-degree assessment and personal development plan directly connects the lessons and training in the online program to the workplace, Griffith explains. "This really does personalize the training and make it more relevant than typical online training courses," he says.

Vanderbilt's *Business Essentials* online program is built around four courses: Strategic Innovation, Finance and Accounting, Strategy and Operations, and Leadership. Each course consists of a variety of modules offered by Vanderbilt

professors who utilize videos and animated PowerPoint presentations to convey learnings. Corporate students have the opportunity to do the 360-degree assessment once they have finished the four courses. Two different assessments are offered, Griffith says. "They can take a *manager 360* and that's for people who already have direct reports," he says. "Or they can take an *emerging leader 360* and that's for people who don't have direct reports yet."

## *The Quiet Students*

The genesis of Griffith's 360-degree assessments was a teamwork class in which he asked students to write detailed papers evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the members of their teams. The evaluations were perceptive and fair, says Griffith. However, the students were extremely reticent to give their feedback directly to the person involved. "I'd say, 'Go ahead and give each





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other the feedback that you wrote about in those papers. It was brilliant. It was spot on,” he says. “Nothing. Nada. Not a word... They just couldn’t do it.” Their hesitation is understandable. As Griffith explains, “They’re in fraternities together, sororities, they’re going to have lunch at the dining center afterwards, and I’m saying, ‘Go ahead and share with each other your perception of each other’s strengths and weaknesses.’”

Recognizing the barrier of delivering feedback in person, Griffith was inspired to create an online assessment that would eliminate this barrier. As he presented his assessment at academic conferences, the response was overwhelmingly positive, leading him, he says, to invest a significant sum to develop a professional, fully automated assessment platform. The platform is structured around 16 competencies, which are grouped into four categories with four competencies each. The four categories are Personal Qualities, Interpersonal Skills, Problem-Solving Skills and Leadership Skills.

## *From Score to Improvement Plan*

“The other big feature that we like for this online program,” says Griffith, “is that when students get their report, they can click on any of the competencies in their report on which they might have kind of a low score, and they’ll be taken to a web page of me giving them a five minute video on how they can improve in that area.” In the video, Griffith says, he includes five books that the students can read, five websites they can visit, and some sample development plans and goals to improve in that area. “So, they get some personalized training specific to that underperforming area on which they were evaluated,” he says.

Finally, and just as importantly, students are asked to identify two goals to work on based on the results of the assessment; they are also asked to develop a specific action plan for each of the two goals. “We ask them to send that personal development

planning worksheet to us,” he says. “I, or some of my colleagues, will evaluate it and make sure it’s a good, strong personal development plan.” If the plan has weak spots, he or his colleagues will make suggestions on how to improve it.

In sum, Griffith says, the online program students “leave the program with a lot of knowledge. They leave with some relevant feedback, an action plan, and some marching orders to work on for the next six months.”

## *A Holistic Approach*

“The assessments that I’ve developed for this program are more holistic in nature than just learning how to become a better manager,” Griffith emphasizes. With an undergraduate degree in Engineering Physics, a master’s in Divinity, and a

Ph.D. in Counselor Education, Griffith notes that he is not a traditional business school professor. “I say that I started off by studying the physical world and then I went into the metaphysical world in Divinity School, and then I went into counseling, which I believe bridges the gap between the two — between this world and the next world,” he says.

Building on this broad-based background, Griffith’s calling or vocation in life, he says, is “to help people live up to their potential, and in a very holistic way.” The 360-degree assessments and personal development programs developed by Griffith for Vanderbilt Owen’s online offering reflect this holistic mindset. “I want to help people be more effective, and perform at a higher standard in their work lives. But I also want them to be better people in general and to be better spouses, and partners, and neighbors, and parents,” he says.



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We're the B-School built for the persistent. The genuine. The professional who knows he or she hasn't heard it all before-and uses that humility to grow. To learn. To change. Take note of Vanderbilt. We're building a new type of business leader-together.

*This is the fourth in a series of four interviews with members of Vanderbilt Executive Education faculty.*

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