



# Challenging assumptions about leadership

This workshop draws on recent research emphasizing how interdisciplinary learning environments challenge traditional concepts of leadership (Winter & Overend, 2024).

This work highlights that:

- Interdisciplinary leadership is a temporal sensibility
- Interdisciplinary teamwork requires a high degree of flexibility and responsiveness

In order for students to work effectively in teams, their assumptions about leadership and teamwork in general ought to be challenged and deconstructed.

By the end of this workshop, you should be able to ...

1. Identify assumptions held about leadership & teamwork.
2. Think critically to challenge your help assumptions.
3. Explore different modes of working collaboratively.
4. Adopt a flexible and responsive approach to teamwork.

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## Lesson plan

Begin by asking, “What is leadership?”

### **Task 1 (10 mins): Brainstorming**

Either as a group using a chalk/whiteboard or in pairs, probe students’ assumptions about leadership. Below is an example list of common assumptions:

- Leadership is about telling people what to do.
- People are born leaders.
- There can only ever be one leader in a group.
- Leaders are decisive and fast-acting.
- Leaders know more about the relevant topic than other group members.
- Leaders hold the primary responsibility for the group’s performance.

### **Task 2 (15 mins): Challenge & Discuss**

Encourage student to unpick the list of assumptions they’ve created. If students are hesitant to discuss use any of the following prompts:

- Is it possible for the person who speaks the least at group meetings to be the leader?
- Is it possible to develop and learn to become a better leader?
- Is it possible for more than one person to take on a leadership role over the course of a project?
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Close the discussion by asking students to consider the potential downsides of permanent role assignment in teamwork, especially in interdisciplinary settings where there may not be clear subject matter expertise.

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### Task 3 (20 mins): Roleplay

How can decisions be made by groups without a single designated leader? What models are the students familiar with (i.e. Consensus building; democratic voting protocols). Ask students about a relevant decision- either related to content you are covering or a particular assignment. In small groups ask them to play out how the decision would be made based on different models.

### Key readings or resources

Biehl-Missal, B. (2010). Hero takes a fall: A lesson from theatre for leadership. *Leadership*, 6(3), 279-294.

Bierema, L. L. (2016). Women's leadership: Troubling notions of the "ideal"(male) leader. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 18(2), 119-136.

Viviani, L. (2017). A political sociology of populism and leadership. *Società Mutamento Politica*, 8(15), 279-304.

Winter, M. and Overend, D. (2024). Troubling leadership in the interdisciplinary challenge-based classroom. *Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies*, 41(2), 77-100.

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