



GSA Leadership: What Does it Look Like?

This activity is designed to help GSAs take a look at some of the different ways to structure leadership within their club and choose the model that works best for them.

Activity time: 30 minutes

Materials needed: A printout of this activity, whiteboard/flipchart, markers, scrap paper

Instructions: Begin by counting off by fours, splitting the GSA into small groups or pairs. Give each group one of the four descriptions of different GSA leadership models found on the next page. Ask each group to spend 10 minutes reading the description of the model they were given and recording responses to the following two questions:

- 1. What are the advantages of using this leadership model?**
- 2. What are the disadvantages of using this leadership model?**

While they will only be recording their responses to the questions above (i.e. the “pros” and “cons”), they may want to think about these additional guiding or “prompt” questions:

- **Who wields the power in this GSA? Who doesn't?**
- **Who bears the responsibility in this GSA?**
- **How are decisions made that affect the club?**
- **How does this format encourage the transitioning of leadership?**
- **What “type” of GSA might this format fit best (think about size, activities the GSA organizes, frequency and length of GSA meetings, etc.)**

Now, ask each group to share back what they discussed, listing the advantages and disadvantages of the leadership model they were given. You can record the responses on the flipchart or whiteboard for everyone to see. After the group has shared their list, open it up to the rest of the group to see if anyone has something new to add to either the pros or the cons.

Continue on to the next group until each group has had their turn sharing. **Remember:** There are advantages and disadvantages to each leadership model, and what works for one GSA will not necessarily work for the other. When settling on a leadership structure for your club, here are some good things to keep in mind:

- L**ay out well-defined and realistic responsibilities for each role to split up the workload
- E**valuate your leadership structure regularly – what works one year may not the next
- A**sk your advisor for help setting up a structure that is fair and creates accountability
- D**elegate responsibility across grade levels – pass the torch, seniors!

HIERARCHY-BASED LEADERSHIP

This structure has four leadership positions: President, Vice President, Treasurer and Secretary. Once a year, elections are held within the GSA to appoint students to these four positions. These four “execs” oversee the club and run the meetings. They also meet regularly outside of club time to make certain decisions about the club.

BOARD-BASED LEADERSHIP

This leadership structure consists of a “board” of people that leads the club: Each board member has a defined area of leadership to which they are assigned, such as an Event Coordinator, a Publicity Specialist, a Fundraising Director, and Class Representatives. The board is led by a Chair or two Co-Chairs, who oversee the other board members and run the meetings. GSA members have to apply for board positions, and the Co-Chairs work with the GSA advisor to place people appropriately. The Co-Chairs must also apply every year, and the decision to appoint them is made by the advisor and other board members.

COMMITTEE-BASED LEADERSHIP

This structure breaks the club up into issue-based committees. GSA members are able to sit on committees, each of which has a specific goal or focus (event committee, fundraising committee, education committee, etc.). Each committee appoints a Chair or Co-Chairs, and the Chair is responsible for reporting back to the larger group about the committee’s activities and progress. There is no election or application process to join a committee or be appointed Chair. There is no time commitment required to stay on a committee.

COOPERATIVE LEADERSHIP

Some GSAs choose to never establish an official leadership team or structure. This type of club operates with a “flat” hierarchy, and tasks and responsibilities are delegated on a volunteer basis. The group decides as a whole what projects to work on and when to meet.

SAMPLE RESPONSES

The responses below are the result of this activity being run at the Spring 2009 GSA Conference. Your GSA may come up with an entirely different set of answers. And that's OK.

HIERARCHY-BASED LEADERSHIP

Pros: It's democratic – the members get to choose the leaders. Power is shared. Roles and responsibilities are set and clearly defined. There is accountability that comes along with holding a leadership position. **Would work well for:** Small or medium-sized GSAs with clear leaders.

Cons: Students who are not in leadership roles might feel left out of the process. This type of model could encourage less participation from non-executives. Some people will get elected and then not do anything. Elections can create drama and can become popularity contests.

BOARD-BASED LEADERSHIP

Pros: There is a clear process to joining the leadership team. Joining the leadership team is based on demonstrated commitment, not on popularity. Tasks and responsibilities are delegated evenly – no one person is taking on everything. It gives people the opportunity to “specialize” in one field. **Would work well for:** Large GSAs with big goals.

Cons: Too much structure can get in the way of getting anything done. This model does not accommodate students who like variety in their roles and tasks. Application process can lead to a lot of extra workload outside of meeting times.

COMMITTEE-BASED LEADERSHIP

Pros: This model can lead to a lot of work getting done. Students have the opportunity to be involved in a lot of different projects. This model encourages the appropriate amount of attention being given to each focus area. The needs of all members can be met, whether they're looking for a social group, an activist group, or an education group. **Would work well for:** Large or medium-sized GSAs with a lot of regular and engaged members.

Cons: There isn't as much accountability – people may not do what they have committed to do. There isn't always time for committees to meet during club time. There is a chance that committees will overlap and responsibilities will become blurry. There is no “formal” structure.

COOPERATIVE LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE

Pros: Everyone has power, which encourages leadership from the entire group. People who are interested in doing things will naturally step up and do them. **Would work well for:** Small GSAs with few regular members who may be just getting off the ground or rebuilding.

Cons: When things aren't organized, it's hard to get stuff done. This model can be easily steered off course by a “takeover”. A lot of work is often left to the GSA advisor. This model does not inherently encourage the transitioning of leadership through the years.