Question 4: Leadership

Prove the method: an obstacle, a decision, persuasion, a result and a lesson.

A capacity for leadership
CRITERION

About 300 words, up to 2,100 characters
WORD LIMIT

Obstacle, decision, persuasion, result, lesson, future
METHOD

Proves the method
JOB IN YOUR THREAD

ABOUT THE EXAMPLES.
Every example here is invented. The people, organisations, places and numbers are fictional. In your own answer every figure must be one you can explain, and your Gates referee should be able to confirm the story.

THE PROMPT IN SHORT.
Examples of leadership, by initiating a change or bringing others together, and how it will help you make an impact in future

01 SECTION 1

What the question asks

The prompt asks for an example or examples of how you have demonstrated a capacity for leadership, "by initiating a change or bringing others together to achieve a goal," and how this will help you make an impact in the future. Both halves are marked. A leadership story with no forward link fails, and so does a confident plan with no evidence behind it.

The Criteria page says leadership "can be expressed in a multitude of ways." A student representative, a team captain, a nurse leading a shift, a junior official building a coalition and a

researcher forming a collaboration can all qualify. What matters is evidence of leadership so far and a clear line to impact in a future career.

02 SECTION 2

The two shapes of leadership

SHAPE	WHAT IT MEANS	PROOF THE PANEL WANTS
The initiator	You saw a gap, nobody owned it, and you started something	A change that exists because you began it and that outlasted your first push
The convener	You brought together people who were not already aligned	People who did not report to you and who changed what they did

A third shape appears in many strong answers: **the person who takes charge when nobody has** , in a crisis or a vacuum. It fits the prompt because it is initiating change under pressure.

03 SECTION 3

Leadership versus delivery

Doing something well yourself is delivery. Getting other people to act differently is leadership. A strong answer always contains the moment you had to move someone: the sceptic, the rival, the person with authority who said no.

DELIVERY	LEADERSHIP
"I organised the event and 200 people attended."	"The faculty refused the hall, so I persuaded the dean with a pilot that cost nothing, and 200 people attended."
"I managed a team of eight."	"Two engineers wanted a rewrite and two wanted a patch. I ran a one-week test of both, and we shipped the patch on time."

04 SECTION 4

The evidence ladder

RANK	EVIDENCE	WHAT IT SHOWS
1	Transformation	Something changed because of you, and it lasted
2	Mobilisation	You moved people who did not report to you
3	Ownership	You took responsibility for a problem nobody had claimed
4	Decision under constraint	You chose between real options with limited resources, and can say why
5	A title with a decision	You held a role and made a consequential call in it
6	A title alone	Participation only. Do not rely on it

If your best story sits at rank 5 or 6, find another story before you try to write it better.

05 SECTION 5

Choosing your story

Score each candidate story against five tests. Pick the one that passes most.

TEST	QUESTION
Obstacle	Was someone or something genuinely in the way?
Decision	Did you make a choice with a trade-off?
Persuasion	Did you move someone who did not have to follow you?
Result	Is there a number, and did it outlast you?
Different from Question 3	Does it tell a different half of the story, or a different story?

06 SECTION 6

The structure and the word budget

MOVE	WORDS (OF 300)	WHAT IT DOES
1. The situation and the obstacle	About 45	What was not working, and why nobody was fixing it
2. Your decision	About 80	The initiative you took, or how you convened, with the choices you made
3. How you brought others with you	About 55	The resistance, what each side feared, and what moved them
4. The result	About 45	What changed, with exact numbers, and whether it lasted without you
5. The lesson	About 30	One specific thing you now do differently
6. Future impact	About 45	The role you will hold and how this approach will be used there

Roughly half the marks sit in moves 3 and 4. Protect them when you cut.

07 SECTION 7

Showing how you moved people

This is the part most answers miss. Use one of four patterns:

PATTERN	HOW IT READS
Answer the real objection	"The dean feared liability, so I drafted a protocol with the legal office."
Show, do not argue	"I ran a two-district pilot and showed the three heads real cases."
Change the ask	"I dropped the merger and proposed a shared index so every department kept its data."
Borrow credibility	"I asked two residents to co-sign each inspection, which the neighbourhood trusted."

Identify what the other side feared or wanted. That shows you listened rather than pushed.

08 SECTION 8

How Question 4 differs from Question 3

	QUESTION 3	QUESTION 4
Focus	Who benefited, and why it matters to you	What you started, and how you moved other people
Hero of the story	The people whose lives changed	You, working through others
Key evidence	Change in people's lives	Decisions, persuasion, what others did differently
Tone	Care and commitment	Judgement and agency

If you use one project for both, tell different halves of it and let the reader see they belong together.

09 SECTION 9

Leading without a title

The panel does not need a title. Test your story by removing it: if the actions still show leadership, it is strong. Good sources for untitled leadership:

- Persuading a department that does not report to you.
- Taking charge when the plan failed.
- Starting a group, a protocol or a programme nobody had asked for.
- Coordinating volunteers across disagreements.
- Mentoring in a way that produced new leaders.

10 SECTION 10

The future clause

The prompt asks how this will help you make an impact in future. Name the role, the setting and the method you will carry. "I will be a leader" says nothing. "I will lead my state's evaluation unit and use the same approach to bring three departments to agree on which schemes work" says everything.

11 SECTION 11

Three worked examples (all invented)

Example A: the initiator (about 285 words)

> *In my fourth year of engineering I noticed that we could model a masonry wall to the third decimal place and had never entered a house that was built badly. When I asked the faculty to let us work in neighbourhoods, the answer was that it was not part of the curriculum and no one would supervise it.*
> *I decided to build the case rather than argue it. I asked 14 classmates to give up three weekends and ran a pilot in two hillside districts, with two lecturers who agreed to join only as observers. Students inspected 60 houses, wrote plain-language reports for families, and presented findings to the neighbourhood association. The dean's first concern was liability, so I drafted a protocol with the university's legal office, added a mandatory safety briefing, and asked residents to co-sign each inspection.*
> *The pilot persuaded the faculty. In 2022 it became a credit-bearing field module, and 120 students have since taken it, completing 780 inspections. Eleven of the original 14 stayed on to supervise newer students, and two municipalities have asked to use our report template.*
> *I learned that people will back a change they can watch working more readily than one they are asked to imagine, and that the person who calls the first meeting also has to write the protocol. I also learned I cannot scale this alone. Within Chile's housing ministry I intend to lead a technical unit that turns an idea tested at one university into a standard a hundred municipalities can use, with the same method: pilot small, answer the sceptic's real objection, then let the evidence persuade.*

WHY IT WORKS.

The obstacle is specific: no curriculum slot, no supervisor. The decision has a trade-off: build the case first. The persuasion step answers the dean's actual fear with an actual document. The

result outlasts him: a credit-bearing module, 11 of 14 students supervising others. The final sentence carries the method into the future role.

Example B: the convener (about 290 words)

> *In 2023 I found that three departments in my state each kept a separate register of migrant workers, and that 34,000 people appeared in two or more with different spellings and addresses. Each register had been built for a good reason. None of the departments had authority over the others, and I was a deputy director with authority over none of them.*
> *I began by listening. I met each department head alone and asked what they were afraid of. Labour feared losing control of its worker data, Health feared a breach, and Food Supply feared a mandate it could not fund. I dropped the idea of a merger. Instead I proposed a shared index that held only a worker's identifier and which register held the rest, so every department kept its own data. I drafted a one-page agreement, ran a two-district pilot, and showed the three heads, with real cases, what happened to a worker in each system.*
> *The pilot found 6,100 duplicate records in two months and recovered ration entitlements for 1,900 workers who had lost them on moving. The cabinet adopted the index in 2024, and it now operates in 11 districts. One department head who first opposed it now chairs the steering group.*
> *I learned that leadership without authority is mostly translation: finding what each party needs and showing how a shared answer protects it. I also learned that I lack the evidence to prove which design is best, which is why I am applying. On return I will lead my state's evaluation unit and use the same approach to bring finance, planning and delivery departments to agree on which schemes work.*

WHY IT WORKS.

The convener's problem is stated plainly: no authority over anyone involved. He names what each party feared, which shows he listened. The key decision (a shared index, not a merger) is a trade-off that unlocked agreement. The opponent who became chair is a vivid, checkable sign of influence. The lesson links to why he needs the course and to the role he will hold. His Question 2 and Question 4 share a theme but tell different parts of one career, which is the golden thread working.

Example C: taking charge in a crisis (about 290 words)

> *In August 2022 floods cut the road to our district hospital, and on the second night I was the senior nurse on a ward of 38 patients with two colleagues and a generator that would last nine hours. The hospital's emergency plan assumed the road would be open. Nobody was in charge of the problem, and I was the most senior person there.*
> *I decided to triage the ward by who could not survive without power. I identified six patients on oxygen or dialysis, moved them to the one room with a wired circuit, and asked the three families still on the ward to hand-pump equipment for the others. I then called the district commissioner's office every two hours with the same message: a number of litres and a number of hours. On the third morning a boat delivered fuel, because the same number, repeated, had reached the person who controlled the boats.*
> *All 38 patients survived the flood. When the hospital reviewed its emergency plan, I wrote the section on power continuity, and 14 hospitals in the province adopted it in*

23. Two of the nurses on that ward now train others in triage.

> *I learned that in a crisis leadership is deciding what not to do, and making one message impossible to ignore. I also learned that a plan never tested fails on the second night. At Cambridge I want the methods to design and test such plans at provincial scale, and afterwards I will lead emergency preparedness for my province's health department.*

WHY IT WORKS.

The title is minor, and the leadership is in the decisions: triage, repeated numbers, families recruited. The persuasion was aimed at a distant authority with a single, simple message. The result lasted: a plan adopted by 14 hospitals. The lesson is specific to the situation, and the future is a role with a scale.

12 SECTION 12

Weak versus strong

WEAK	WHY IT FAILS	STRONG
"As President of the Debate Society, I led 60 members and organised events."	A title and an activity list	"When our society lost its funding, I proposed a paid-entry tournament, persuaded the faculty to waive the hall fee, and raised enough to keep 60 members debating."

WEAK	WHY IT FAILS	STRONG
"I led my team to success."	No decision, no obstacle	"Two engineers wanted a rewrite and two wanted a patch. I ran a one-week test of both, and the patch won, so we shipped on time."
"I learned that leadership is about listening."	A platitude	"I learned to ask each side what they feared before I proposed anything, because the fear is usually the real objection."

13 SECTION 13

The test suite

- **The title test.** Remove your job title. Do the actions still show leadership?
- **The resistance test.** Is there someone who said no, and how did you move them?
- **The trade-off test.** Did you choose X over Y, and can you say why?
- **The survival test.** Did the change continue after you stepped back?
- **The credit test.** Can the reader see what the team did and what you did?
- **The lesson test.** Could a different applicant have written your lesson?
- **The referee test.** Can your Gates referee confirm it first-hand?

14 SECTION 14

Common mistakes

1. A title instead of a decision.
2. "We" throughout, so the panel cannot see you.
3. No obstacle.
4. A result without numbers, or one that did not last.
5. A platitude as the lesson.
6. A future role that is vague.
7. Reusing the Question 3 story with the same emphasis.

8. Claiming a team's result as your own.

15 SECTION 15

Checklist

- [ ] The first paragraph states a real obstacle, not just a role
- [ ] I describe a specific decision and its trade-off
- [ ] I show how I moved someone who did not have to follow me
- [ ] I separate what the team did from what I did
- [ ] The result has exact numbers and lasted beyond my involvement
- [ ] The lesson is specific to me
- [ ] The future role and method are stated
- [ ] My Gates referee can confirm the story first-hand
- [ ] It stays under 2,100 characters including spaces