

Leadership assembly

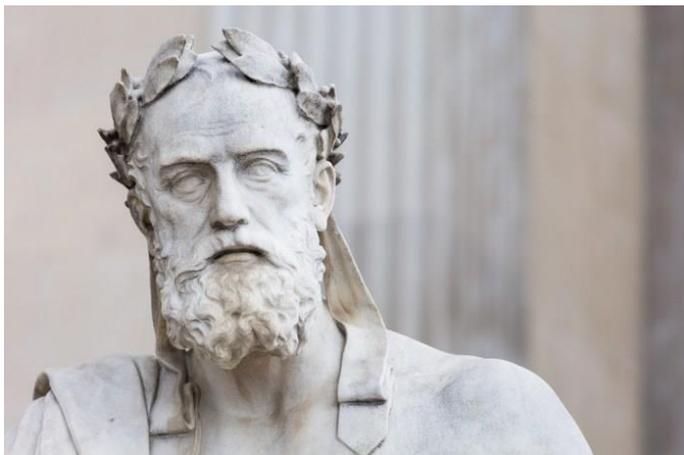
I often say that I would like you all to be leaders. I think that means I should try to say what I mean by leadership, so you know what I am asking for.

Here is an important distinction. Leadership is not the same as 'being in charge'. In an ideal world, those in charge would show leadership, but the two things are not the same at all. Being in charge means that you have a position of responsibility. Showing leadership means using your responsibility wisely and well.

So what is this mysterious thing to which we should aspire? One profession in which leadership is actively cultivated is the military.

Strong leadership often makes the difference in battle – a brilliant general is hard to beat, even if they are out-numbered.

There are plenty of examples of successful generals who have shared the secrets of their leadership. One of the best, who wrote a most extraordinary account of their life and their actions, is not particularly well known. His name is Xenophon. He was an Ancient Greek, born in Athens in 430BC, about 2500 years ago. He died at the fine age of 76 in 354BC. It is fair to call Xenophon an all round genius – he was a brilliant historian, biographer and essayist, but above all he was an extraordinary soldier. This is what he looked like.



We know about Xenophon's leadership from a book he wrote in about 400 BC called *The Persian Expedition*. The book describes an incredible journey.

A large army of Greek soldiers went to fight as a mercenary army in Asia; Xenophon was one of those soldiers. Here is a map of the route the Greek army took. They travelled as part of a much larger army along the lower, southern route marked by the red line. At the bottom right of the map, they met a Persian army at the gates of Babylon.



Despite their skill, the battle they fought was lost. Cyrus, the king they were fighting for, was killed and then five of their generals were treacherously murdered by their enemies. The Greek mercenaries, known as the Ten Thousand, found themselves without leadership. They were far from the sea, deep in hostile territory near the heart of the Persian Empire, in what is now called Iraq. They had little in the way of food and they were cut off from any help, surrounded by a hostile population and with fresh Persian armies to deal with.

Despairing, the Greeks elected new leaders, one of whom was Xenophon. They had a single task – to fight their way out. They had to get from the site of the battle, near Babylon, to the Greek colonies on the Black Sea, more than 1000 miles north.

Xenophon had been handed the toughest challenge of leadership that almost anyone has faced. He succeeded triumphantly.

Starting with a demoralised, leaderless group that had no hope, Xenophon has since been described thus: 'No general ever worked for the safety of his soldiers with greater ardour or to better effect.' As he led them, he invented the art of a rearguard fight – a fighting retreat against overwhelming odds, out-numbered and out-gunned, deep in enemy territory and surrounded by hostile forces.

The thing that made the difference – the opportunity to find success - hung upon one thing: Xenophon's leadership.

He took them from a dusty plain outside Babylon to the sea and the ships that would take the men home to Greece. The moment the exhausted soldiers climbed the last hill, and saw the path home is one of the most moving. Xenophon described it: 'When the men in front reached the summit and caught sight of the sea there was great shouting. Xenophon and the rearguard heard it and thought that there were enemies attacking in the front. However, the shouting got louder and drew nearer. Those who were constantly going forward started running towards the men in front, who kept on shouting. And the more there were of them, the more shouting there was.

It looked then as though this was something of considerable importance. So Xenophon mounted his horse, and taking Lycus and the cavalry with him, rode forward to give support.

And quite soon they heard the soldiers shouting out '*Thalassa, thalassa*', 'The sea! The sea!' and passing the word down the column. Then they all began to run, the rearguard and all, and when they had all got to the top, the soldiers, with tears in their eyes, embraced each other and their generals and captains.'

You will want to know how Xenophon did it.

Start by noticing that Xenophon was in the rearguard: in the most threatened and dangerous spot, supporting his men where they needed help most.

Xenophon believed that a good leader should have a positive relationship with his men. The warmth between leader and led was vital.

He was not an aloof or distant man: he knew them all and was full of good will. Xenophon wrote 'Men who are trusted comrades must be won over by words and deeds to their advantage, so that they do not envy their leader his successes nor betray him in adversity, but be his friends.'

Xenophon also believed that a team had to be built upon trust and involvement. The day after their original generals had been murdered, the army was called together and were not just told of the situation, but they were involved in finding solutions. The army was asked to approve their new generals' decisions and to put forward their own suggestions.

His next key message is this: a leader must demonstrate his right to lead. A good leader does this by showing that he is superior to his men in those qualities which they value. He had to be a better tactician, more intelligent and far-sighted, committed to his soldiers' protection and security, eager to share successes.

A good leader, according to Xenophon, must listen to his men and be responsive to them. Xenophon writes these words: 'My door has always been open in the past to anyone who has a request to make of me and it always will be.' Soldiers knew that they could come to their leader '...at breakfast and at dinner and that even if he was sleeping they could wake him.'

Good leaders lead by example: they face hardship alongside their team. Xenophon said, 'When you are living well, I shall be living well; but when I am experiencing cold or heat or night-watching, I shall expect you to be doing the same.' The point is that the leader and the men he leads are all in it together. The leader claims no special privileges for himself. It is important to emphasise that good leaders claim no special privileges – power should never be abused. At the end of the long campaign out of Persia, Xenophon writes that he is proud that he is still poor, and that he has claimed no treasure or booty looted from his enemies. Quite unlike Clive of India.

Good leaders show confidence and project positivity. Xenophon's men were terrified of the Persian cavalry, and although he was also privately concerned about the threat of that cavalry, Xenophon gave his men encouragement: '10,000 cavalry are nothing more than 10,000 men. No-one has ever been killed in action by the bite or kick of a horse – it is men who cause casualties in battle.' Xenophon shows us that good leaders project courage and confidence.

Throughout the account Xenophon gives of the march to the sea, he repeatedly and generously praises other soldiers in his army by name; he never boasts of himself. He shows that a good leader shapes the team's behaviour by looking to find people doing things right.

He rewards success in his team and the team will be powerfully motivated to do the right thing and win the leader's praise. This is a much greater encouragement to the team than a negative leader who seeks to find fault and punish failure.

Finally, a good leader must set a personal example that inspires others to desire to do better and succeed. Xenophon describes the need for 'a resolve, a hunger to win and a desire for acclaim.'

I think Xenophon makes a noble example. He built a team with his men using actions that you can employ today.

- Build positive relationships.
- Foster trust and involvement.
- Prove your right to lead by being successful.

- Listen to your team and be responsive to them.
- Lead by example.
- Be confident and project positivity.
- Claim no special privileges.
- Praise others and do not boast.
- Set a personal example of excellence in character.

Those are the lessons from antiquity, but I would like to add two more, just add a modern flavour. The first is to have integrity. Essentially this means that you should not do things that, if others found out about them, would make you feel shame or remorse. That piece of advice is just obvious. No one wants an embarrassed or embarrassing leader.

The next element of good leadership is hard to follow, but I think it is essential. Do not lie. Ever. If you lie to someone in your team you run the risk of wrecking that relationship, as if you are caught they can no longer have confidence in you.

Even worse, they will realise that you are prepared to manipulate them to achieve your goals. This is not a positive thing.

Further, if someone on your team hears you lie to someone else, one of two bad things will happen. Either you will lie unconvincingly, which is embarrassing and you lose face. Even worse, you might prove yourself to be a good liar. How then can your teammate have any faith that you have not already deceived them? Their trust is gone. Let me be clear, you don't have to tell the whole truth, all the time. However, actual deceit is not an option to a leader.

That is my take on leadership, borrowed from Xenophon, one of the greatest men of the Ancient World. Good leadership is timeless. I hope it stands you in good stead as you take positions of responsibility and others look to you for leadership.