



## **Leadership Strategies from Antiquity**

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Since the beginning of civilization, human beings have instinctually created a natural hierarchy of leadership in society: from alpha figures in early cultures, to tribal leaders, emperors, monarchs, elected officials, and modern day world leaders. Beyond the political realm, leadership hierarchies are developed and implemented on smaller scales throughout cultures. They can be found virtually everywhere: in business, academia, professional organizations, sports teams, and even marching bands. Leading other human beings is inherently a challenging task, but is arguably more so in today's society where it is common to hear polarized views loudly broadcast through technology and social media. Those that find themselves in leadership positions must be equipped with skills to successfully navigate the delicate human psyche and the challenges of our time.

Philosophers and historical figures over the centuries have produced several writings on leadership that are often referenced and used as inspiration by modern day politicians and business owners. This paper will deal with works on the subject from antiquity, particularly the writings of Marcus Aurelius, Xenophon, Sun Tzu, and Niccolo Machiavelli. While the intent of these figures and purpose of their several century old writings are different and may seem dated, there are fundamental philosophical parallels that are congruent in their ideas and are relevant in today's society.

To fully understand the perspective of these writings, some biographical information is required. Marcus Aurelius was an Emperor of Rome in the second century. He was a practitioner of Stoicism, a philosophy that entails using logic and denying the impulses of emotions and desires to dictate human behavior. His



*Meditations*, a collection of writings that he produced in the last decade of his life, are an example of stoic writing.<sup>1</sup>

Xenophon, a Greek philosopher and student of Socrates, lived circa 430-345 BC. His partly fictional work titled *Cyrus the Great* was written as a testament to Xenophon's idea of the ideal leader. The book chronicles the Persian king Cyrus and his conquest of Babylon.<sup>2</sup>

Sun Tzu was a Chinese military general living between the years 554 and 496 BC. His writing, *The Art of War*, is a treatise on Sun Tzu's philosophy of war and managing conflicts. It has been a significantly influential work for leaders in the military and otherwise.<sup>3</sup>

Niccolo Machiavelli was an Italian political figure and philosopher from Florence in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. His writings, most notably his 1513 work titled *The Prince*, has been a significant influence in the development of modern politics.<sup>4</sup>

While these philosophers span an era of over 2000 years and hail from different regions of the world, there are recurring and unifying themes in their writings that characterize, in their mind, the ideal leader. These attributes are: a vision of success, keen foresight and adaptability, efficiency, the ability to inspire, an understanding of the minds of their people, and humility.

Leaders must have a clear vision of what constitutes success in order to dictate and justify the direction and actions of an organization. The vision serves as the ultimate goal and the endeavors that are embarked upon should all be in pursuit of realizing the vision. The foundation of the vision should be, at its core, in the best interest of the greater good of the organization and not solely serve the individual interests of the leaders themselves.<sup>5</sup> The vision should also be shared and understood by all members of the organization.<sup>6</sup> This is important because it allows for justification of the decisions

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<sup>1</sup> Collins, Desmond. *Background to Archaeology: Britain in Its European Setting*. (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 59.

<sup>2</sup> Xenophon. *Cyrus the Great: The Arts of Leadership and War*, ed. Larry Hedrick. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 5.

<sup>3</sup> McNeilly, Mark R. *Sun Tzu and the Art of Modern Warfare*. (Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Bock, Gisela, ed. Quentin Skinner. *Machiavelli and Republicanism*. (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Machiavelli, Niccolo, ed. Philip Smith. *The Prince*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1992), 41.

<sup>6</sup> Xenophon, 8.



made by leadership. If the vision is unknown to the followers, executive decisions become incomprehensible and may lead to unrest in the organization.

Followers must also believe in the vision and see it as worthy to pursue.<sup>7</sup> Leaders must convince their followers that their vision is a worthwhile endeavor and that it was conceived with the best interest of the group in mind. Sun Tzu said, “you will not succeed unless your men have tenacity and unity of purpose, and above all, a spirit of sympathetic cooperation.”<sup>8</sup> While people who join organizations generally share similar values and ideals of the entity that they seek membership, it can still be challenging for the leader to unify the group with a single vision. One method to achieve unification is by setting long, medium, and short-term goals so that progress can be timely obtained and measured. Success will build upon itself and, as the leader, earning a reputation for achievement results in loyal followers.<sup>9</sup> It is also important that those chosen to be higher ranking members of an organization share the same enthusiasm and passion for the leader’s vision.<sup>10</sup> This aids in the dissemination of the vision and motivation for success throughout the organization.

Additionally, when the leader develops a vision, it is important that they consider the ideals of the previous leader and if the followers shared in the former head’s enthusiasm.<sup>11</sup> If the previous leader was revered, and the new leader creates a vision that is significantly different than before, success will be a greater challenge. In this case, the new leader should slowly implement new ideas and increase their reputation for success over time. On the other hand, if the organization was previously not unified and the former leader was not well endorsed, the new leader may have free reign to steer the group in a new direction.

Another attribute that the ideal leader should possess is a keen sense of foresight. It is imperative that all decisions are calculated and contingency plans are drafted so that most obstacles are avoidable or able to be overcome.<sup>12</sup> The key is that before the pronouncement, the leader should visualize all the elements of a decision:

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<sup>7</sup> Machiavelli, 73.

<sup>8</sup> Tzu, Sun, trans. Lionel Giles. *The Art of War*. (El Paso: El Paso Norte Press, 2011), 63.

<sup>9</sup> Tzu, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Xenophon, 46-47.

<sup>11</sup> Machiavelli, 29-30.

<sup>12</sup> Xenophon, 2-21.



the options, and every consequence that each choice may result. One person alone, however, cannot comprehensively anticipate all possibilities and consequences of decisions. Therefore, it is important that leaders seek council from others and listen carefully to the suggestions of advisors.<sup>13</sup> In *The Art of War* Sun Tzu states, “the general who wins a battle makes many calculations in his temple before the battle is fought,”<sup>14</sup> and, “the enlightened ruler is heedful, and the good general full of caution... what enables the wise sovereign and the good general to strike and conquer, and achieve things beyond the reach of ordinary men, is foreknowledge.”<sup>15</sup>

However, foresight alone will not ensure success, but the ability to adapt to changing circumstances is the complimentary and necessary attribute to foreknowledge. Anticipation of various conditions can be gained through visualization as discussed previously, and contingency plans may aid in the leader prescribing a remedy for varying situations. Regarding adaptability Sun Tzu wrote, “He who can modify his tactics in relation to his opponent, and thereby succeed in winning, may be called a heaven-born captain.”<sup>16</sup>

The efficiency of a leader is also an important measure of quality. People generally do not appreciate their time being wasted by other people, so, a leader must keep diligence in his preparation, and never remain idle.<sup>17</sup> Organizations should be systematized so that they operate with the utmost productivity. This will aid in the achievement of goals and the realization of the vision, as well as make the followers feel productive. Procrastination and complacency should always be avoided, as efficiency is the key to progress.<sup>18</sup>

It is also helpful for the leader to demonstrate efficiency when they address followers. Xenophon and Sun Tzu respectively epitomize the trait of efficiency by writing, “Brevity is the soul of command,”<sup>19</sup> and, “The art of giving orders is not to try to rectify the minor blunders and not to be swayed by petty doubts. Vacillation and

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<sup>13</sup> Aurelius, Marcus, ed Paul Negri. *Meditations*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1997), 61.

<sup>14</sup> Tzu, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Tzu, 76-77.

<sup>16</sup> Tzu, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Machiavelli, 58-59. S

<sup>18</sup> Aurelius, 76-81.

<sup>19</sup> Xenophon, 109.



fussiness are the surest means of sapping the confidence of an army... when a general, is weak and without authority; when his orders are not clear and distinct; when there are no fixed duties assigned to officers and men, and the ranks are formed in a slovenly, haphazard manner, the result is utter disorganization.”<sup>20</sup>

Leaders must also be able to inspire their followers. This is perhaps the most difficult attribute of the ideal leader to obtain because of the dependence on the natural charisma of the leader, and the willingness of the followers to be inspired. Throughout Machiavelli’s work, *The Prince*, he regularly refers to the terms, *virtu* and *fortuna*. There is debate amongst scholars as to what exactly the writer is referring, but in general, Machiavelli is describing the abilities or virtues of a person, *virtu*, and luck, *fortuna*. While the previously discussed attributes are all achievable through diligent planning and thought, the ability to inspire would be an example, according to Machiavelli, as *virtu*. While the amount of success in this area is greatly dependent upon the leader’s natural ability, the referenced philosophers do provide advice that will assist in a leader’s inspirational attribute.

Firstly, one must lead by example. A leader must demonstrate and meet the same expectations as the followers, and should never ask a subordinate to encumber a task that the leader would not do themselves.<sup>21</sup> Secondly, the leader must show poise and stand firm when facing adversity and unexpected onsets.<sup>22</sup> The leader should exude confidence instead of anxiety because the temperament of the one in charge is contagious to those around them, and the leader must always be more steadfast than those they lead.<sup>23</sup> Thirdly, the leader should show care for the followers to earn trust and loyalty. Xenophon states, “every leader must actively raise up his followers, and you must win their hearts by kindness that springs from love.”<sup>24</sup> If the leader treats others well and shows genuine care, then loyalty and eventually, reciprocated love is established. If the followers love their leader, they will follow whole-heartedly.<sup>25</sup> Finally, the leader should consistently work towards developing an intrinsic motivation within the

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<sup>20</sup> Tzu, 49-53.

<sup>21</sup> Xenophon, 251.

<sup>22</sup> Aurelius, 69.

<sup>23</sup> Xenophon, 209, 255.

<sup>24</sup> Xenophon, 291.

<sup>25</sup> Machiavelli, 40-41, 66.



followers. This element, the most difficult to achieve, is gained through the followers becoming increasingly more invested in realizing the vision as discussed previously.

Effective leaders are also able to understand the minds of those that they lead.<sup>26</sup> It is important that those in charge make the effort to understand each follower's motivations and values because loyalty lies in self-interest.<sup>27</sup> A leader's comprehension of what drives individual followers allows the leader to adjust their approach to best serve the self-interest of the follower. This in turn will result in a deeper investment in the organization's cause, better productivity, and a more pleasant work environment.

It is also important that the leader is readily available and approachable to their followers.<sup>28</sup> This is necessary for the leader to stay in touch with those that they lead. It is common for those in power to become distant from the constituency, resulting in the inability to understand the minds of the population and hinders the effectiveness of the leader.

When disciplining a follower, the leader must try to understand the points of view of all parties and use logic and reasoning when reprimanding instead of emotionally charged decisions.<sup>29</sup> While it is important that insubordinate conduct is addressed, patience and understanding will often result in a more desirable outcome. The leader should make sure that the follower in question understands the reasoning behind the disciplinary action, but must be presented in a manner that is logical and calculated. According to Xenophon, it is always best to "use the voice of reason, not the thunder of judgment."<sup>30</sup>

Additionally, it is important that leaders understand that followers are not expendable. It can be easy for followers to enter the mind-set that they are pawns in a larger scheme orchestrated by the leader. To avoid this, the leader should recognize the good efforts of model followers.<sup>31</sup> This reassures the best followers that their contribution is valued and inspires others to strive for higher achievement.

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<sup>26</sup> Machiavelli, 69.

<sup>27</sup> Xenophon, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Machiavelli, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Aurelius, 83.

<sup>30</sup> Xenophon, 157.

<sup>31</sup> Xenophon, 68.



Finally, the ideal leader must show humility. Xenophon wrote, “success always calls for greater generosity – though most people, lost in their own egos, treat it as an occasion for greed,”<sup>32</sup> and, “people who respond to good fortune with modesty and kindness are harder to find than those who face adversity with courage.”<sup>33</sup> A leader’s arrogance can be detrimental to an organization. It creates distance between the leader and followers, creates a less productive environment, and disdain for the leader. Those in command must learn to receive without arrogance, and be ready to let it go.<sup>34</sup>

The leader must understand that their acts should always primarily have the best interest of the group in mind. Upon a certain level of success, leaders, if not wary, may begin making decisions that are more beneficial to them than the whole and become more ambitious for their own prosperity. Most of the referenced philosophers advise against such selfishness, but in particular, Marcus Aurelius warns, “Offenses which are committed through desire are more blamable than those which are committed through anger. Someone excited by anger seems to turn away from reason with a certain pain and unconscious contraction; but he who offends through desire, being overpowered by pleasure seems to be in a manner more intemperate in his offense.”<sup>35</sup> Xenophon simply states, “Ambition leads to disaster.”<sup>36</sup> The key here is to understand that it is never about the leader, but all actions should be for the good of those that are led.

Being a leader can be a daunting task with many crucial elements of the position to consider. While no two situations are alike, and therefore no simple recipe for success, those who lead can only reference those who have led before and the advice of others. The enigma of leadership and the various attempts through history at deciphering its code are not definitive, and those from antiquity that have written on the subject and are most influential all tackle the issue from different angles: as a warrior, as a philosopher, as a ruler, and as a politician. However, while the intent of their writings and impressions of the ideal leader are slightly dissimilar, there are common characteristics that they attribute to the consummate leader: a vision for success, keen

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<sup>32</sup> Xenophon, 90.

<sup>33</sup> Xenophon, 273.

<sup>34</sup> Aurelius, 77.

<sup>35</sup> Aurelius, 18.

<sup>36</sup> Xenophon, 224-225.



foresight and adaptability, efficiency, the ability to inspire, an understanding of the minds of their people, and humility. While these common threads between the referenced philosophers might not guarantee the success of a leader, they do provide a solid foundation for quality leadership that is not only applicable to ancient times, but is relevant to the world today.



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