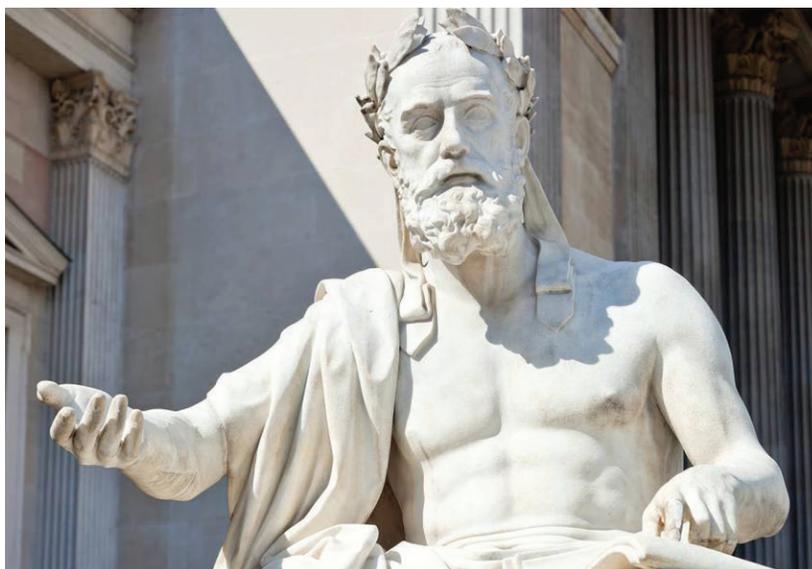


THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

What the Ancient Classics Can Teach Us About Leadership



Words from classical figures such as Xenophon of Athens can guide today's leaders, according to WSJ Leadership Expert C. L. Max Nikias. *Photo: ISTOCK Photo*

By C. L. Max Nikias

The art of leading people is simple, provided that everyone happily agrees on the direction in which they want to be led.

That is never the case, of course, which is why Xenophon of Athens observed 2400 years ago that humans may be the most difficult of all animals to govern.

Since his time, countless books have been written on leadership. Type “leadership” into Amazon, and you will receive around 190,000 results for books that cover this broad topic. Moreover, a Deloitte study suggested that up to \$14 billion is spent annually on executive training and management.

Yet with so much information available, experts and public figures still disagree about the core issues, such as the extent to which a leader can *convince* followers, and the extent to which a leader can *coerce* followers.

Over my academic career, I've had the privilege of working with top scholars with important vantage points on leadership, and have worked closely with those in the vanguard of modern leadership scholarship.

But too much of modern management teaching consists of idealism and wishful thinking. As a result, gurus make the craft sound easier than it is in practice—or they

fail to address many of the more powerful forces that leaders “in the arena” have to contend with.

I keep returning to the lessons of leadership I learned as far back as my youth and have come to the following conclusion: a grounding in many of the classics of Western literature can offer timeless insights into how human organizations, societies and leaders function in the clutch. Two ancient writers stand out in particular.

Xenophon of Athens

In my opinion, the Bible of leadership

books is the *Kyropaedia* (“Education of Cyrus”) by Xenophon, a brilliant theorist-practitioner who was a leading student of Socrates and a legendary general.

In his fictionalized biography of Cyrus, Xenophon taught an approach to leadership balancing realism and ethical responsibilities. He highlighted Cyrus’ self-restraint in the pleasures and emotions of the body, discipline and long-term strategic sense as he assembled the world’s first empire. Xenophon used Cyrus’ life to illuminate the raw materials and motivations that aspiring leaders must have—including a love for honor, a love for humanity, and a love for learning—while also mapping the journey from an inexperienced and cautious leader to a commanding and charismatic one.

Given how many contemporary leaders have been derailed by lack of discipline, restraint and far-sightedness, the example of Cyrus becomes freshly relevant.

Sophocles

Sophocles’ tragedies also have much to say to leaders today. In “Antigone,” he displays the many tensions involved with leadership. Breaking radically with Greek custom, Sophocles places a young Athenian woman (Antigone, whose name means “born to oppose”) at the story’s center. Her conflict with the ruler Creon, as she seeks an honorable burial for her late brother, results in crisis and tragedy for both sides, because both refuse to show flexibility or a willingness to compromise.

Sophocles brings into sharp relief the

tensions leaders face when legitimate values are in competition—such as the conscience of the individual versus the demands of the state, or the will of the people versus the prerogatives of the leader.

More than most modern management experts, Sophocles reveals that the mature leader must make painful tradeoffs. Resolving every dilemma with a “win-win” is a wonderful ideal, but most leaders face painful win-lose choices.

Consider too, Sophocles’ “Oedipus Tyrannus.” This often-misunderstood work is at its core a saga about a leader’s relentless search for truth and willingness to pay the ultimate price. As his last act, Oedipus willingly takes on divine punishment in order to free Thebes from a plague.

Oedipus is an intelligent, caring, unselfish, decisive leader who doesn’t hesitate to impose a punishment on himself in order to save his city. This sacrifice is supreme, in that his only reward is the restitution of Thebes. He destroys himself in order to save his people.

Sophocles’ fable can awaken and heighten the conscience of any manager and leader in any context.

There is considerable information of benefit in contemporary leadership literature. But the most powerful and timeless lessons about what motivates effective leaders, what allows them to succeed, and what lures them to failure have been tested by time, over centuries. And they still speak today with certain voices to guide us.



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