

# ONE

## Leadership Through Knowledge

*‘Authority flows from  
the one who knows’*

A MODERN PROVERB

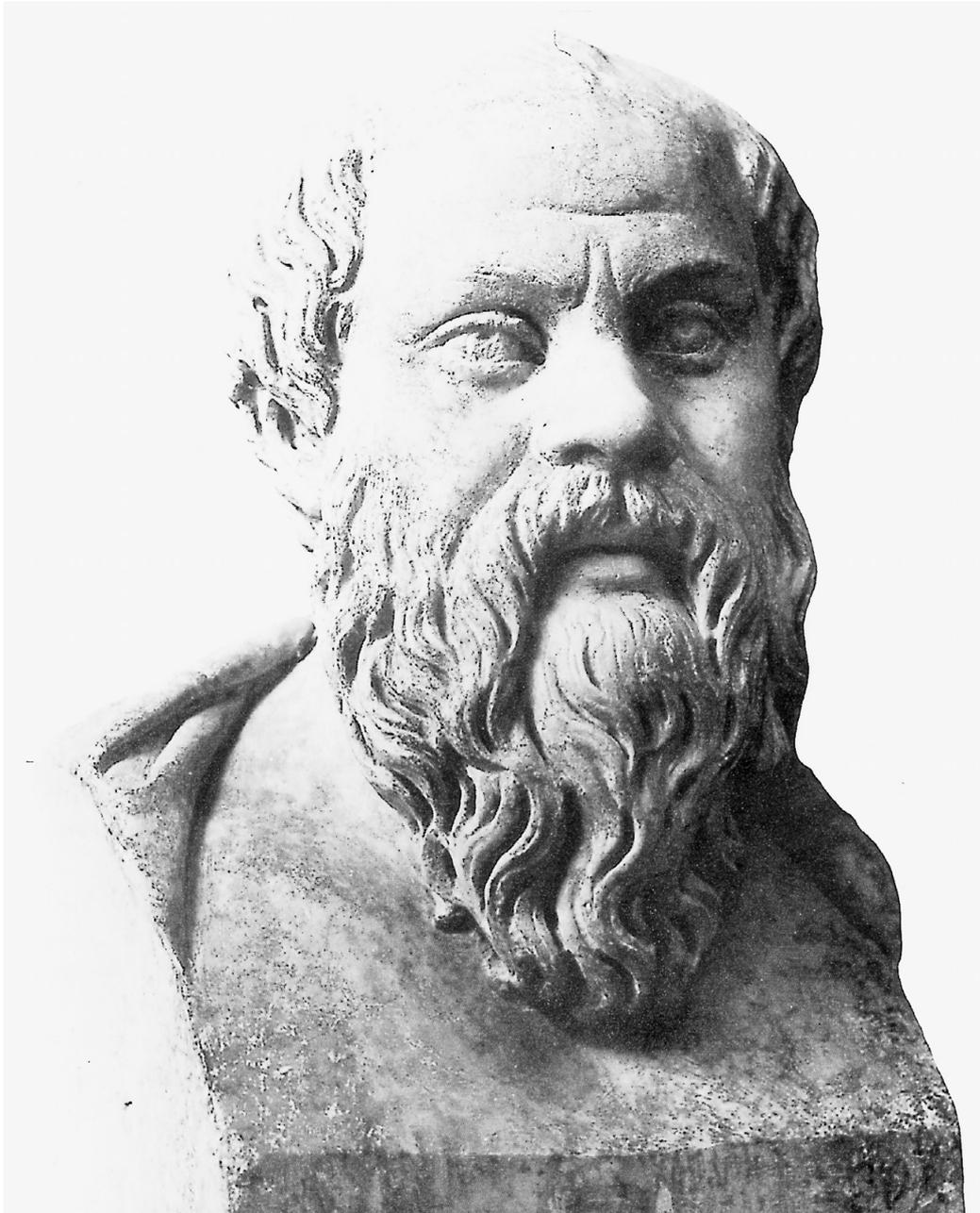
‘It is a fact that some men possess an inbred superiority which gives them a dominating influence over their contemporaries, and marks them out unmistakably for leader-

ship.’ So an eminent churchman Dr Hensley Henson, Lord Bishop of Durham, told his audience at the University of St Andrews. ‘This phenomenon is as certain as it is mysterious,’ he continued. ‘It is apparent in every association of human beings, in every variety of circumstances and on every plane of culture. In a school among boys, in a college among students, in a factory, shipyard, or a mine among the workmen, as certainly as in the Church and in the Nation, there are those who, with an assured and unquestioned title, take the leading place, and shape the general conduct.’

These words were spoken in 1934, the year, incidentally, that Adolf Hitler became Head of State in Germany with the title of *Führer*. The Bishop believed, as most people thought then, that leadership was a form of ‘inbred superiority’ – in other words, you are either born with it or not. The born leader will emerge naturally as the leader because he (note the assumption that leaders are men) has innate qualities which give him that ‘assured and unquestioned title.’ Such a leader could presumably lead in any circumstance or situation.

It may come as a surprise that Scotland’s oldest university, St Andrews, instituted lectures in leadership in 1930. Sponsored by a local Scottish family, the Walker Trust series of leadership lectures was inaugurated by John Buchan, Lord Tweedsmuir, with a lecture on ‘Montrose and

Leadership’. There were twelve lectures in all, spread over a period of some thirty years. They included lectures by Montgomery and Wavell. The tradition of thinking about leadership, however, is much older than this century, and its roots lie outside Britain. The story begins in ancient Athens, among the group that gathered around the philosopher of practical reason – Socrates.



Socrates. Apart from being himself a leader of ideas Socrates was the first person to ask some of the key questions about the nature of leadership.

## Socrates – A Leader of Ideas

Socrates lived in the fourth century BC. In early life he is said to have been a sculptor. As a citizen-in-arms he served with distinction in at least three campaigns, but the greater part of his life he devoted to philosophical discussion. Socrates set himself the task of clarifying for himself and other men current issues of political and moral life. The method he used was so distinctive of him that we still describe it as ‘Socratic’. Briefly, Socrates pretended ignorance in order to encourage others to express their views fully. When he had drawn them out by cross-examination he gently exposed their inconsistencies by the same process. It was not an approach that made him popular in all quarters – Socrates was no respecter either of persons or of hallowed beliefs in his quest for truth. In 399 BC Socrates’ enemies accused him, quite wrongly, of impiety and of corrupting the young. In spite of an eloquent self-defence at his trial, they condemned him to death by forcing him to drink hemlock.

### **The Parable of the Ship’s Captain**

The sailors are quarrelling over the control of the helm... They do not understand that the genuine navigator can only make himself fit to command a ship by studying the seasons of the year, sky, stars, and winds and all that belongs to his craft; and they have no idea that, along with the science of navigation, it is possible for him to gain, by instruction or practice, the skill to keep control of the helm whether some of them like it or not.

Plato, *The Republic*

Socrates wrote no books. Our main sources of information about him are Plato’s *Dialogues*, Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* and Aristophanes’ satirical picture in *The Clouds*. It is uncertain how far Plato and Xenophon attribute their own opinions to their common master. When it comes to the theme of leadership it is especially difficult to determine how much goes back to Socrates. Xenophon himself was both a leader and a thinker about leadership. Did he put his own views into the mouth of Socrates?

He certainly wrote in the form of Socratic dialogues, with Socrates as one of the speakers. Or, when as a young man he heard Socrates cross-examining various would-be leaders, did he take notes? These questions cannot be answered with any degree of confidence, but at least we know of one core idea in Xenophon which does go back to Socrates – that leadership is tied to situations and depends largely upon the leader having the appropriate knowledge: we know this because Plato also takes up that theme. But Xenophon's own experience and reflections must have led him to develop the seeds of ideas thrown out by the 'The Thinker' (as he and his fellow students nicknamed Socrates). Xenophon's own military interest, for example, comes over clearly in the two following dialogues.

## **The Case of the Aspiring General**

One of the young Athenians around Socrates announced that he wished to stand in the annual election of ten generals in the city's army. Socrates encouraged him to attend the classes of an itinerant teacher called Dionysodorus, who had recently arrived in Athens and advertised a course in generalship. When the young man returned he had to endure some good-humoured banter from Socrates and his friends.

'Don't you think, gentlemen,' said Socrates, 'that our friend looks more "majestic" as Homer called Agamemnon, now that he has learned generalship? For just as he who has learned to play the harp is a harper even when he does not play, and he who has studied medicine is a doctor even though he does not practise, so our friend will be a general for ever, even if no one votes for him. But an ignoramus is neither general nor doctor, even if he gets every vote. Now', he continued, turning to the young Athenian, 'in order that any one of us who may happen to command a regiment or company under you may have a better knowledge of warfare, tell us the first lesson he gave you in generalship.'

'The first was like the last,' the young man replied: 'he taught me tactics – nothing else.'

‘But that is only a small part of generalship,’ replied Socrates. By question- and-answer he then led the young man into a much fuller understanding of the knowledge and abilities required for a successful military leader. A general must be good at administration, so that the army is properly supplied with military equipment and provisions. Moreover, as Xenophon knew from his own experience, a general should ideally possess a number of person qualities and skills:

*‘He must be resourceful, active, careful, hardy and quick-witted; he must be both gentle and brutal, at once straightforward and designing, capable of both caution and surprise, lavish and rapacious, generous and mean, skilful in defence and attack; and there are many other qualifications, some natural, some acquired, that are necessary to one as a general.’*

Even on the all-important subject of tactics, Socrates found the instruction given to his young friend by Dionysodorus to be deficient. Did Dionysodorus give no advice on where and how to use each formation? Was *no* guidance given on when to modify deployments and tactics according to the needs of the many different kinds of situations one encounters in war? The young man insisted that this was the case. ‘Then you must go back and ask for your money back,’ said Socrates. ‘For if Dionysodorus knows the answers to these questions and has a conscience, he will be ashamed to send you home ill-taught’.

## **The Case of the Young Cavalry Commander**

One day Socrates met a newly-elected cavalry commander. Socrates asked him first why he had sought that office. The young man agreed that it could not have been because he wanted to be first in the cavalry charge, for the mounted archers usually rode ahead of the commander into battle, nor could it have been simply in order to get himself known to everyone – even madmen achieve that. He accepted Socrates’ suggestion that it must be to leave the Athenian cavalry in better condition than when he found it. Xenophon, both a renowned authority on horsemanship and the author of a textbook on commanding cavalry, had no difficulty in

explaining what needs to be done to achieve that end. The young commander, for example, must improve the quality of the cavalry mounts; he must school new recruits – both horses and men – in equestrian skills and then teach the troopers their cavalry tactics.

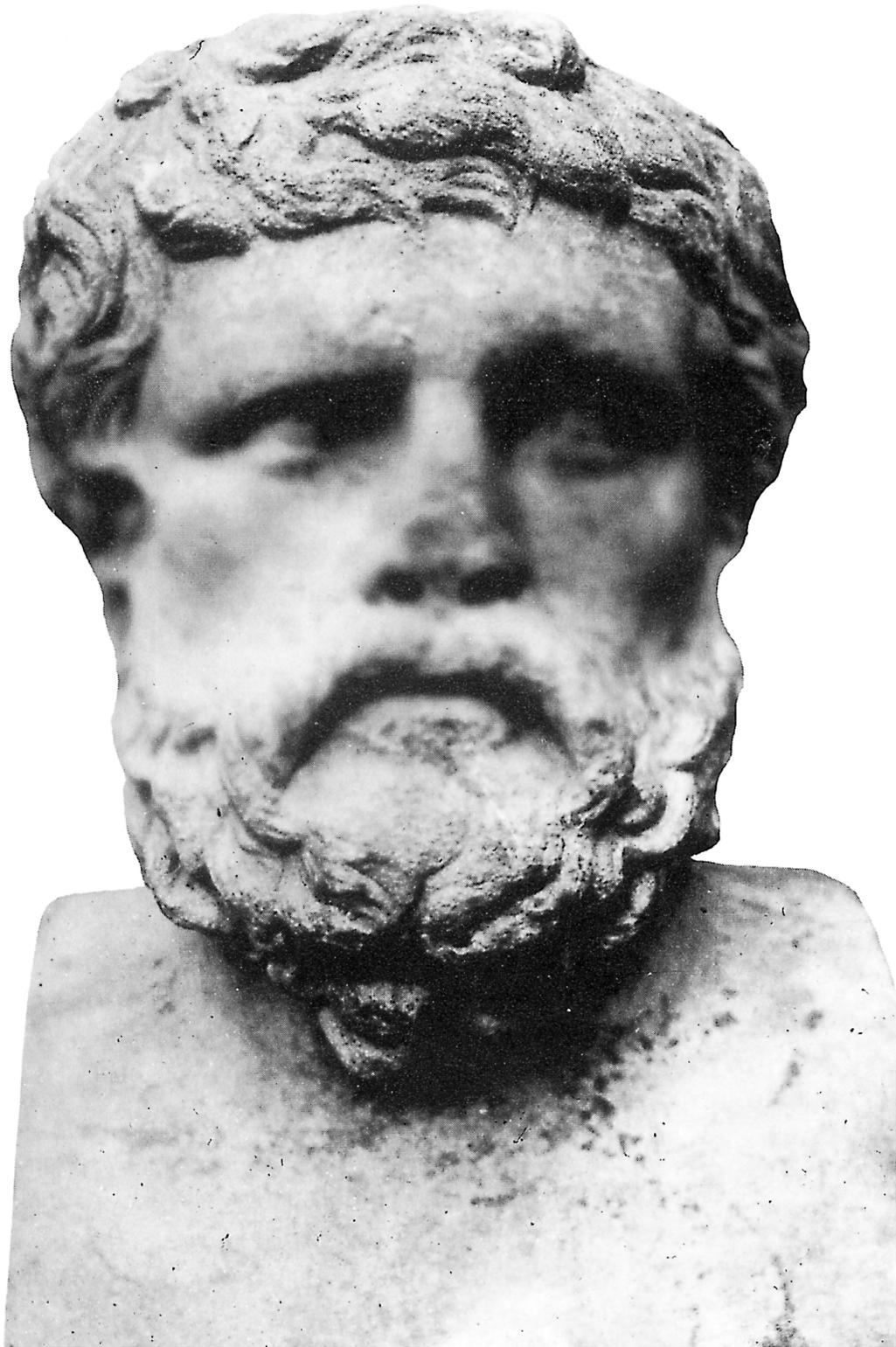
‘And have you considered how to make the men obey you?’ continued Socrates, ‘Because without that horses and men, however good and gallant, are of no use.’

‘True, but what is the best way of encouraging them to obey, Socrates?’ asked the young man.

‘Well, I suppose you know that under all conditions human beings are most willing to obey those whom they believe to be the best. Thus in sickness they most readily obey the doctor, on board ship the pilot, on the farm the farmer, whom they think to be most skilled in his business.’

‘Yes, certainly,’ said the student.

‘Then it is likely that in horsemanship too, one who clearly knows best what ought to be done will most easily gain the obedience of the others.’ Xenophon captures here a very distinct theme in Socrates’ teaching on leadership. In harmony with the rest of the doctrine of Socrates (for, despite his pose of ignorance, Socrates had ideas of his own), it emphasises the importance of *knowledge* in leadership. People will obey willingly only those whom they perceive to be better qualified or more knowledgeable than they are in a particular situation.



Xenophon. Besides being a successful military leader himself  
Xenophon also taught leadership through his books.

## **Knowledge – The Key to Leadership**

Socrates clearly taught that professional or technical competence should be a prerequisite for holding a position of leadership responsibility. ‘You must have noticed,’ said Socrates to another man, ‘that if he is incompetent, no one attempts to exercise authority over our harpists, choristers, and dancers, nor over wrestlers? All who have authority over them can tell you where they learned their business.’

The tendency of people to follow a leader who knows what to do is strengthened in a time of crisis. In a discussion with Pericles, son of the famous statesman, which took place when an army from the Greek state of Boeotia was threatening Athens, Socrates made the additional point that such a crisis should be more to an effective leader’s liking than a period of ease and prosperity, for it is easier to make things happen. He illustrated this point with a favourite analogy, the behaviour of sailors at sea:

*‘For confidence breeds carelessness, slackness, disobedience: fear makes men more attentive, more obedient, more amenable to discipline. The behaviour of sailors is a case in point. So long as they have nothing to fear, they are, I believe, an unruly lot, but when they expect a storm or an attack, they not only carry out all orders, but watch in silence for the word of command like choristers.’*

There are three main forms of authority in human affairs: the authority of position or rank, the authority of personality, and the authority of knowledge. Socrates clearly emphasised the latter. It is the man or woman who knows what to do and how to do it who will be obeyed, especially in times of crisis. Now, if that were the whole story about leaders, then the right to lead would be acquired with technical or professional knowledge. When the soldier learns tactics, the doctor studies medicine, the sailor acquires knowledge of navigation and the farmer becomes experienced in agriculture, then they would also be qualifying as leaders. For they are accumulating the necessary knowledge and experience which will incline those more ignorant than themselves to obey, at least in their own field. For Socrates and his school, as exemplified by Plato, knowledge is the main gateway to leadership. We can trace here the beginnings of a major theme in the Western tradition of leadership. The desire for educated rulers, governors or leaders – men and women with an authority based

on knowledge and experience rather than those who relied upon birth, title or position – would encourage the establishment of schools and universities. It was a rivulet in the tradition which the Renaissance transformed into a mighty river.

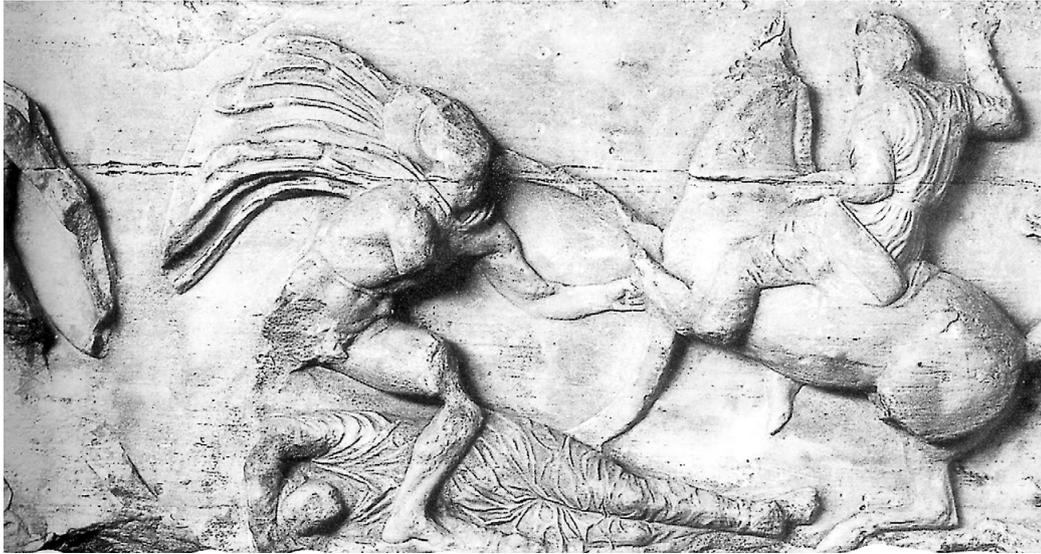
But is having relevant knowledge and experience to the situation – the general working field or the particular situation of crisis – the *whole* of leadership? Xenophon knew that it was not so. From his close observation of men in action, he made a distinction between those leaders who won *willing* obedience from their subordinates and colleagues, as compared to those who merely extracted compliance from them either out of fear or a grudging acceptance of the authority of knowledge.

### **A man of the moment**

Apparently against the advice of Socrates, Xenophon enlisted in a Greek army which the Persian prince Cyrus the Younger hired in a bid to replace his brother Artaxerxes II on the throne of Persia. In 401 BC a decisive battle was fought at Cunaxa, not far from ancient Babylon. The 10,400 Greek hoplites – heavy armoured spearmen – acquitted themselves well on the day, but Cyrus lost both the battle and his life.

After the battle of Cunaxa, the Persians offered the Ten Thousand (as the Greeks were later known) surrender terms if they stayed where they were, but threatened to attack if they moved from their camp. One of their six generals, a Spartan named Clearchus, took it upon himself to act as spokesman for his fellow generals to the Persian emissaries, but gave no indication to anyone what he was going to say. After sunset he summoned a meeting of the officers, briefly reviewed the options and then told them what they must do. They must head northwards that very night on the first stage of a long march to safety on the shores of the Black Sea, which lay some 800 miles away. As Xenophon records in *The Persian Expedition* everyone sensed that only Clearchus could lead them out of mortal danger:

*‘On receiving their instructions the generals and captains went away and carried them out; and from then on Clearchus was in command, and they were his subordinates. This was not the result of an election, but because they realised that he was the one man who had the right sort of mind for a commander, while the rest of them were inexperienced.’*



A Greek foot soldier, crouching behind his shield, meets a charging Persian horseman. Providing they kept their good order Greek spearmen had little to fear from cavalry.

## **Are Knowledge and Experience Enough?**

Clearchus, the Spartan general who saved the day after Cunaxa, is a good example of such a limited leader. We can recognise men of his stamp again and again in military history. The Roman army depended upon men such as he. Their type would resurface in latter armed forces: the Prussians of Frederick the Great, the British Royal Navy in Georgian times, the German *Wehrmacht* in the Second World War, and the American Army in Vietnam.

Clearachus was about fifty at the time of his death. He had spent much of his life at war, acquiring by hard experience a sound knowledge of his profession. But, as Xenophon noted, Clearachus never won the hearts of men. He had no followers who were there because of friendship or good feeling towards him. Xenophon continued:

*‘As for his great qualities as a soldier, they appear in the facts that he was fond of adventure, ready to lead an attack on the enemy by day or night, and that, when he was in a awkward position, he kept his head, as everyone agrees who was with him anywhere. It was said that he had all the qualities of leadership which a man of his sort could have.*

*He had an outstanding ability for planning means by which an army could get supplies, and seeing that they appeared; and he was also well able to impress on those who were with him that Clearchus was a man to be obeyed. He achieved his result by this toughness. He had a forbidding appearance and a harsh voice. His punishments were severe ones and were sometimes inflicted in anger, so that there were times when he was sorry himself for what he had done. With him punishment was a matter of principle, for he thought that any army without discipline was good for nothing; indeed, it is reported that he said that a soldier ought to be more frightened of his own commander than of the enemy if he was going to turn out one who could keep a good guard, or abstain from doing harm to his own side, or go into battle without second thoughts.*

*So it happened that in difficult positions the soldiers would give him complete confidence and wished for no one better. On these occasions, they said that his forbidding look seemed positively cheerful, and his toughness appeared as confidence in the face of the enemy, so that it was no longer toughness to them but something to make them feel safe. On the other hand, when the danger was over and there was a chance of going away to take service under someone else, many of them deserted him, since he was invariably tough and savage, so that the relations between his soldiers and him were like those of boys to a schoolmaster.'*

It is tempting to conclude that while Clearchus had great abilities as a soldier, and also as what we would now call a manager (planning and controlling), he fell far short as a leader. One reason why people today often react so negatively to the idea of military leadership is because they assume that all military leaders are cast from the same mould as Clearchus. This is certainly not the case.

Xenophon's last point, that Clearchus treated his soldiers like a pedagogue (literally in Greek a 'leader of children') is illuminating. The Greeks prided themselves on the belief that they were the most intelligent people on the face of the earth; they were deeply conscious, too, of their tradition of equality and democracy. They did not like being bullied or treated as children.



A Greek vase depicting spearmen in action. Through such individual combat Greek warriors won the glory and renown for which they craved.

Xenophon, aged twenty-six, was elected as one of the successors to Clearchus and the other five Greek generals whom the Persians butchered in an act of treachery not long after Cunaxa. Having been taught leadership by Socrates, what style of leadership would Xenophon display? Doubtless he thought hard about that question. Obviously he did not want to be another Clearchus, nor did he want to err too far in the opposite direction of courting popularity and appearing weak. Xenophon tells us that Proxenus the Boeotian, one of the other murdered generals, had made that mistake. It was he, incidentally, who had first invited Xenophon to go on the Persian expedition, and so they were probably friends. Proxenus was a very ambitious young man and had spent much money on being educated by a celebrated teacher called Gorgias of Leontini. 'After he had been with him for a time,' wrote Xenophon, ' he

came to the conclusion that he was now capable of commanding an army and, if he became friends with the great, of doing them no less good than they did him; so he joined in this adventure planned by Cyrus, imagining that he would gain from it a great name, and great power, and plenty of money.' Yet, with all these ambitions, Proxenus made it clear to all that he wanted to get these things in a fair and honourable way or not at all. He liked to be liked, however, which led him into the mistakes of appearing soft and of courting popularity for its own sake:

*'He was a good commander for people of a gentlemanly type, but he was not capable of impressing his soldiers with a feeling of respect or fear for him. Indeed, he showed more diffidence in front of his soldiers than his subordinates showed in front of him, and it was obvious that he was more afraid of being unpopular with his troops than his troops were afraid of disobeying his orders. He imagined that to be a good general, and to gain the name for being one, it was enough to give praise to those who did well and to withhold it from those who did badly. The result was that decent people in his entourage liked him, but unprincipled people undermined his position, since they thought he was easily managed. At the time of his death he was about thirty years old.'*

It could be said that Proxenus was not right for the military situation, and he could not establish the right relationship with soldiers. But probably he would have been as ineffective in non-military spheres of leadership as well. For Proxenus's very virtues created a certain lack of firmness or toughness which can lead to a loss of respect. Without respect, leadership is fatally impaired. A weak leader exposes himself to exploitation by his more unscrupulous subordinates. Bad leadership of this kind looks remarkably the same whatever the field or area of human enterprise.

Xenophon, who sat at the feet of Socrates, the western world's first great teacher of leadership, now shows us what he meant by leadership.



The Mountainous country of southern Turkey through which Xenophon and the Ten Thousand made their famous march to the Black Sea.

## **A Leader in Action**

Imagine yourself on a sun-baked, stony hillside on the southern edge of Kurdistan (on the borders of what is now Iraq and Turkey) watching this scene unfold before you. It is about noon; the sky is clear blue, except for a line of white clouds almost motionless above a distant mountain range. Marching through these foothills comes the advance guard of the Ten Thousand. The hot sun glints and sparkles on their spears, helmets and breastplates. They are hurrying forward, eager to reach the safety of the mountains in order to be rid of the Persian cavalry snapping like hunting dogs at their heels. But first they have to cut their way through the Carduci, the warlike natives of the region. Across the pass you can see a strong contingent of these tribesmen already occupying the lower heights of a steep hill which commands the road. Now the Greek advance guard

has spotted them, too, and it halts. After some hurried deliberations you can see a messenger running back. A few minutes later a horseman – it is Xenophon – gallops up to the commander of the advance guard, a seasoned Spartan captain named Chirisophus. Xenophon tells him that he has not brought up a reinforcement of the light-armed troops that had been urgently requested because the rearguard – still under constant attack – could not be weakened. Then he carefully studies the lie of the land. Noticing that the Carduci have neglected to occupy the actual summit of the hill, he puts this plan to his Spartan colleague:

*‘The best thing to do, Chirisophus, is for us to advance on the summit as fast as we can. If we can occupy it, those who are commanding our road will not be able to maintain their position. If you like, you stay here with the main body. I will volunteer to go ahead. Or, if you prefer it, you march on the mountain and I will stay here.’*

*‘I will give you the choice,’ replies Chirisophus, ‘of doing whichever you like.’*

It would be an arduous physical task, Xenophon points out, and he tactfully says that being the younger man he would be the best one to undertake it. Having chosen some 400 skirmishers, armed with targets and light javelins, together with 100 hand-picked pikemen of the advance guard, he marches them off as fast as he can go towards the summit. But when the enemy see what the Greeks are doing, they too begin to head for the highest ground as fast as they can go.

*‘Then there was a lot of shouting, from the Greek army cheering on its men on the one side and from Tissaphernes’ people cheering on their men on the other side. Xenophon rode along the ranks on horseback, urging them on. “Soldiers,” he said, “consider that it is for Greece you are fighting now, that you fighting your way to your children and your wives, and that with a little hard work now, we shall go on the rest of our way unopposed.”*

*Soteridas, a man from Sicyon, said: “We are not on a level, Xenophon. You are riding on horseback, while I am wearing myself out with a shield to carry.” ‘*

As the commander, Xenophon had several options open to him. He could have ignored the man. Or he could have threatened him. Or he could conceivably have had him arrested and punished later. Xenophon took none of the courses. Writing of himself in the third person he told us what happened next:

*‘When Xenophon heard this, he jumped down from his horse, pushed Soteridas out of the ranks, took his shield away from him and went forward on foot as fast as he could, carrying the shield. He happened to be wearing a cavalry breastplate as well, so that it was heavy going for him. He kept on encouraging those in front to keep going and those behind to join up with them, though struggling along behind them himself. The other soldiers, however, struck Soteridas and threw stones at him and cursed him until they forced him to take back his shield and continue marching. Xenophon then remounted and, so long as the going was good, led the way on horseback. When it became impossible to ride, he left his horse behind and hurried ahead on foot. And so they got to the summit before the enemy.’*

Note that it was the other soldiers who shamed Soteridas into taking back his shield. Although Xenophon, burdened with a heavy cavalry breastplate, eventually fell back behind the ranks as the men rushed up the hill, yet he encouraged the men forward and urged them to keep their battle order. Eventually he remounted and led his soldiers from the front, at first on horse and then again on foot.

Once the Greeks had gained the summit the Carduci turned and fled in all directions. The Persian cavalry under Tissaphernes, who had been distant onlookers of the contest, also turned their bridles and withdrew.

Then Chirisophus’s men in the vanguard of the army were able to descend through the mountain pass into a fertile plain beside the Tigris. There they refreshed themselves before facing the fearsome rigours of a winter march amid the snow-covered Armenian highlands. Eventually, in the summer of the following year, the army reached the safety of the Hellespont, the narrow straits dividing Europe from Asia. They owed much to Xenophon who, not long afterwards, became the sole commander of the Ten Thousand.

Anyone reading this story will recognise that in it Xenophon acted as a leader. He led by example. That is a universal principle or theme in the story of leadership. It is especially important where people face hardship or danger: they expect their leaders to run the same risks and shoulder the same burdens as themselves, or at least show a willingness to do so.

The story of Xenophon's assault on the Carduci illustrates another cardinal principle of leadership. Leaders encourage people. They renew spirits, giving others fresh courage to pursue the common course of action. Xenophon's words and deeds infused the Greeks with new confidence and resolution. His brave example inspired them.

## **Leadership Through Knowledge**

---

### CHAPTER REVIEW

#### **Summary**

It was Socrates who first taught that leadership tends to be exercised by the person who knows what to do in a given situation. Consequently, he placed much emphasis upon the need to acquire the appropriate technical competence and experience if one wished to lead others. But knowledge is not the whole story. There are people who are technically competent and highly specialised in their fields, yet they are not recognised as leaders. Something more is required. As the experience of Xenophon suggests, a good leader gives direction, sets an example, shares danger or hardship on an equal footing, and wins the willing support of others. He or she should win respect without courting popularity. Are these more general leadership abilities transferable from one field to another? Could they be learned?

## Key Concepts

- Socrates did not write any books, but two of his circle – Xenophon and Plato – independently give us in his name the teaching that leadership flows to the person who knows what to do in the given situation. The situational approach, as it has later been called, dates back to Socrates.
- People are most willing to obey those who know what they are doing.
- As the experience of Xenophon himself and his observations of other generals suggests, a good leader gives direction, sets an example, and shares danger or hardship on an equal footing. He or she should win respect without courting popularity.
- There is a difference between managing – administration, planning and controlling – and leadership. A good leader does those things but transcends them: he or she has the secret of arousing the willing and enthusiastic support of others to the common task at hand.
- The story of Xenophon’s assault on the Carduci illustrates another cardinal principle of leadership. Leaders *encourage* people. They renew spirits, giving others fresh courage to pursue the common course of action. Xenophon’s words and deeds infused the Greeks with new confidence and resolution. His brave example inspired them.

## Further Reflection

Xenophon mentions more than once in this opening description the personal *qualities* required in a General. In the *Cyropaedia* he listed the qualities of an ideal ruler as:

- temperance
- justice
- sagacity
- amiability
- presence of mind
- tactfulness
- humanity

- sympathy
- helpfulness
- courage
- magnanimity
- generosity
- considerateness.

Aristotle, Plato's greatest pupil, suggested just four qualities of leadership:

- 1 justice
- 2 temperance
- 3 prudence
- 4 fortitude.

Field Marshal Montgomery quoted them with approval.

Lord Slim also taught four qualities, but they are different:

- 1 courage
- 2 willpower
- 3 initiative
- 4 knowledge.

What qualities do you think a business leader requires?

It is helpful first to distinguish *qualities* of personality and character from *knowledge* in the technical or professional sense that Socrates had in mind. Then, think in terms of levels of qualities. As a start, a leader should possess or exemplify the qualities expected or required in their working groups or organisations.

- Look back on the last chapter and list the five core qualities of a good soldier, regardless of rank. Keep it by you, and amend it as you read the rest of the book.
- In your business what qualities of personality and character do you expect everyone to have? Do you – by common consent – exemplify those qualities? (These qualities, you should note, are *necessary* but not *sufficient*: – they won't make you a leader, but you cannot be one without them.)

There are some more generic qualities associated with leadership, in any field, such as enthusiasm, integrity (the quality that makes people trust you), energy, toughness or being seen and accepted as a leader. Using this brief list, and adding to it as you read on, identify your own strengths and weaknesses in terms of leadership qualities.

Having read these lists and the other attributes mentioned above, what do you think at present are the five or six key qualities or characteristics of a good leader today? What other qualities can you foresee becoming important and so joining your list in the next ten years? (You may like to revise this, your 'first thoughts' list, when you have finished reading the book.)