

# Knowledge, community, and humility in cyrus



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The Education of Cyrus by Xenophon is a book renowned in history as a useful tool in instructing leaders as well as illuminating the life of a noble king. It is also notable for another reason which lies in the title itself. The book focuses on the education of Cyrus, an education which Xenophon shows to continue throughout his life. Cyrus's education never stops but is a lifelong state of existence. In The Education of Cyrus, Xenophon uses the example of Cyrus to portray what he believes to be the essential qualities of a leader, proposing that good leaders seek the counsel and advice of wise individuals, pursue knowledge doggedly, and display humility.

Xenophon demonstrates that a successful leader must seek the counsel and advice of trusted and wise individuals. This is something Cyrus does time and time again in The Education of Cyrus. Collaboration and communication can only strengthen an individual, and this sense of community runs throughout the narrative of Cyrus. In Book 4, Cyrus speaks to the Median and Hyrcanian cavalry and concludes, "If anyone sees anything better, let him speak". This statement reflects a common theme throughout Cyrus' speeches to the troops and generals during battle. He frequently asks for the thoughts of others and invites them to communicate their thoughts, should they disagree with him.

Additionally, Cyrus continuously pursues knowledge and puts himself in positions to learn. When young Cyrus must decide whether to remain in Medea or return to Persia, he explains to his mother, "at home, mother, among those of my age, I both am and am thought to be the best at throwing spears and shooting the bow, but here I know quite well that I am inferior to those of my age at riding...if you leave me here and I learn how to

ride a horse, when I am in Persia, I think that I will easily be victorious for you over those who are good on foot.” Here, Cyrus demonstrates an awareness of his areas of weakness as well as an earnest desire to improve upon them, turning his weaknesses into strengths. This attitude continued into adulthood, when Cyrus gives a speech to his troops, proclaiming, “ But someone will perhaps say that we do not understand how [to ride]. No, we do not, by Zeus, but even of those who now understand, before they learned, no one understood.” Cyrus encourages these adult men to learn a new skill, because accumulation of knowledge does not end with childhood.

Finally, Xenophon emphasizes that a good leader must be willing to humble themselves sometimes. Cyrus displays humility several times, acknowledging his own flaws and mortality. When speaking to allies about his troops’ unrefined riding skills, he jokes, “ we will surely afford you a great laugh when we are seated on our horses, and, I think, when we fall down on the ground.” In doing this, he humbles himself before others and eases the tension by joking at his own expense. This is a wise action for a leader to take; in Cyrus’s case, he created a more relaxed environment between the leaders whilst subtly making them feel superior in this respect. Humility not only flatters others but fosters pursuit of new experiences and knowledge, which can diversify the skills of a leader as well as strengthening bonds between allies.

It can be seen that Cyrus possesses all of the traits listed above; he is humble, eager to learn, and invites additional counsel. However, a concern sometimes arises when his motives and intentions are examined in more depth. Xenophon and the various people in Cyrus’s life frequently heap

praise upon Cyrus, exalting him as “worthy of wonder.” These perceptions come primarily from observation of the outcomes of his actions, as that is all they can easily know. It is, then, up for debate whether he acts as such from true desire to seek knowledge or in order to gain allies and power.

Although it is easy to look to the eventual demise of his empire and conclude that his motives were impure, a more complex analysis shows that Cyrus displayed these positive characteristics from the beginning, and did not act in ways purely motivated by hunger for power. For one thing, Cyrus demonstrated these traits even as a child. Cyrus was known as an inquisitive child, constantly asking questions and pursuing new ideas. As Xenophon writes, “Moreover, because he loved to learn, he himself used to ask many questions of whomever was around about how things happened to be.” Clearly, this curiosity was in his nature. Additionally, he displayed humility and understanding of his own flaws, as “he did not challenge his associates where he knew that he was superior, but he began right where he knew quite well that he himself was inferior.” This attitude, of challenging others in areas he struggled with, was indicative of a child willing to admit his failings and determined to improve them. It also displays the awareness that the greatest improvement comes from learning from others who are more skilled than yourself. These behaviors which Cyrus displayed as a child are reflected in his adult life.

Essentially, Xenophon uses Cyrus as an example a leader who possessed humility, eagerness to learn, and utilized wise counsel. Xenophon examined Cyrus’s life with the question of what made him a great leader, and in his portrayal, one of the defining factors seems to be these traits.