

Gavin Zahner

Dr. Hall

HONS114:1 Creating Culture

April 17, 2026

From Kings to Philosophers:

Leadership In Ancient History

From the powerful kings of the ancient Near East, to the Greek age, to the Roman Empire, leadership has appeared throughout many pieces of classical literature. While the earliest leaders derived authority from divine right or sheer physical dominance, the modern era demands soft power, emotional intelligence, and global connectivity. The evolution of leadership throughout history, power is seized and kept but became the changing expectations of the 'follower' and has fundamentally redefined what it means to lead.

Leadership is no longer a static imposition of will, but a dynamic dialogue between the people. By analyzing the development of leadership through the laws of Babylon in the *Code of Hammurabi*, the council from "Advice of a Sumerian Father to His Son", the reliant mentorship of Sappho in "Very Well, Charaxus", "Let's Not Pretend", "Brothers Poem" and the conviction of Socrates in Plato's "Phaedo" and Biblical characters in *The Holy Scriptures*, effective leadership has transitioned from a model of rigid rules to a framework of influence, humility, and service to others; this parallels contemporary leadership of the modern era. Successful leaders pass down valuable lessons and share their narratives, and true leadership is concerned with the exercise of force, and the enduring power of sharing a story to inspire and provide unity for others.

To begin, the *Code of Hammurabi* is one of the oldest sets of laws that provide a framework for leadership (Prince 21). According to *The American Journal of Theology*, “the discovery of the *Code of Hammurabi* is the most important event which has taken place in the development of Assyriological science” (Prince 2). This is because prior to Babylon, there had not been a set of comprehensive and publicly displayed *laws*; this was created to end lawlessness. This set of rules advanced civilization because it provided structure instead of chaos and offered a way of life for the people. This was also a tool for unification; Hammurabi led many different cities, and they were able to work under one codebook. The laws were carved onto tall tables in view for the public to see. While guidelines for employees are not usually listed on seven-foot tablets, great leaders do not hide their rules; they ensure that everyone knows and understands the laws.

However, the code also provided liability for people: “if [a person] has come forward to bear witness to corn or money, he shall remain liable for the penalty for that suit” (Hammurabi 3). Leadership is not just about power; it is about being legally and ethically responsible. This is true also for people who are working professionals, because it makes sure that they produce good quality work. Hammurabi also introduces the idea of stewardship in his code: a leader’s job is to protect the interests of those with less power, like a Chief Executive Officer looking for lower-level staff.

Furthermore, it provided accountability from the top down on how to deal with justice. One of the best-known sections in the *Code of Hammurabi* is section 196: “if a man has put out the eye of a free man, they shall put out his eye” (Hammurabi 4). This is well known because it teaches people to do what is done to others. While most people no longer follow this code, it has been used as an inspiration to many new guidelines for modern leadership, such as *employee*

handbooks. This shows that leaders have gone from “*because I say so*” to “*it is in our policy*,” which is important because it provides consistency in rules and regulations.

Continuing, in ancient history, the anonymous advice from “Advice of a Sumerian Father to His Son” presents leadership not just as power, but as a way of life through integrity. The author of this text was likely a part of a privileged class (Dendy) because his son was able to be in high leadership positions. This piece of literature emphasizes avoiding unnecessary conflict: “Do not loiter where there is a dispute, for in the dispute they will have you as an observer. Then you will be made a witness for them, and they will involve you in a lawsuit to affirm something that does not concern you. In case of a dispute, get away from it, disregard it” (anonymous). The father warns against getting into unnecessary lawsuits. However, if that cannot be avoided, then the father recommends deescalating the situation. This parallels later systems of ethics by returning evil with kindness and maintaining justice.

The advice that the father leaves for his son is to maintain integrity. If he is working in a high office, he guides him on wealth. A high official is a steward of another treasure, and being fiscally responsible is important for leaders, managing budgets, bookkeeping, and maximizing expenditures. The son is warned not to “covet” the wealth or “set your mind on a secret crime” (anonymous); leaders in executive positions should be free of corruption. Also, leadership involves the understanding that “the matter will be investigated”, because many modern corporations have yearly auditing, which will expose theft and financial misconduct.

Much of this piece focuses on the power of the tongue – this is common in leadership literature. The son is warned against speaking too freely and advises practicing restraint because “what you say in haste you may regret later” (anonymous). Modern leaders need to learn how to handle situations lightly and not act out of haste. This is especially important because it prevents

a leader from being weighed down by trivial or non-essential conflicts. Ultimately, true authority is rooted in composure and the ability to detach from immediate triggers.

In this selection, effective leadership was connected from religious devotion. A leader's success was seen as a reflection of their connection with their god. The father instructs his son to worship: "sacrifice and pious utterance are the proper accompaniment of incense" (anonymous) every day. This also suggests that their gods value those who treat people with honor (Dendy). By doing so, the leader ensures that their own requests will be granted by their god, much like the workplace environment of coworkers helping each other out with their projects and ensuring that they are meeting deadlines.

Moreover, Sappho's *Poems* moves from leaders controlling others to leaders influencing others. Sappho used her influence through the education of the next generation and the cultivation of cultural values. Sappho was focused on family and politics in her writings. As the head of a prominent social circle for girls in Lesbos, her leadership was grounded in mentorship and the yearning for knowledge. In her poem, "Very Well, Charaxus," she focuses on her brother who is a merchant. She believes that her brother has let his wealth go to his head but wants him to know that stability comes from level-headed leadership and stewardship. Sappho writes about how a family overcomes its challenges and reorients itself: "As for the rest, let us entrust it to the gods, for fair weather quickly arises from huge storms. Those whom the king of Olympus wishes to have a divine helper to turn them from troubles, it is they who become blessed and fortunate" (Swift 3). In leadership, this would make a leader resilient by restoring order and moral direction after a period of chaos or economic failure. This is also an act of accountability because Sappho protects the family status and acts as a moral leader for her family.

Sappho in "Let's Not Pretend," understands the limit of power and leadership: "No, no one can cure it; keep beauty from going, and *I* cannot help it. God himself cannot do what cannot be done. So, age follows and catches everything" (Sappho. 45). While most leaders of ancient history are obsessed with immortality and legacies, Sappho provides a look at humanity as a limiting constraint. A good leader should recognize that there are things that no amount of human willpower can overcome such things as time, death, and war. A true leader should be focused on influencing what can be changed in the present. Many leaders fail because they want the "Golden Age" to last forever. Humility provides accountability to a leader, which is important to show that they are grounded and growing as leaders. Through fragments like "Let's Not Pretend" and the "Brothers Poem," Sappho proves that true leadership lies not in the ability to control others, but in the power to fix a community and keep integrity during times of crisis.

Furthermore, while Plato's *Phaedo* is about the soul's immortality and the final hours of Socrates, it provides a blueprint for the cultivation of leadership. For the modern leader, this selection shows the pursuit of intelligence and ethics, a framework for stewardship, the dangers of organizational cynicism, and the pursuit of a corporate purpose. He shaped western thinking about the importance of inner character over external power, ethical behavior as a foundation for leadership, and that true leaders seek truth.

Socrates was not only a great thinker, but also a persuasive leader. Leadership to Socrates meant self-mastery and ethics. Plato's *Phaedo* offers a great model of moral and philosophical leadership. In *Phaedo*, Socrates is facing execution however he is still calm and committed to his morals. He refuses to back down even when he is about to face death. This is an important part of leadership: not backing down when someone is committed to their values. Leadership requires courage, doing what is right, even when it is not easy: "I think it likely that one who has spent his

life in philosophy should be confident when he is going to die, and have good hopes that he will win the greatest blessings in the next world” (Plato 85). This connects to other leaders who have stood up for their values in history, such as reformers and activists.

Socrates spent most of *Phaedo* teaching his followers about the afterlife and souls; this can be associated with contemporary lessons for succession planning. By sharing of loss and death, Socrates is equipping his followers to lead long after his death. Socrates leads by asking questions and guiding the discussion of others. The Socratic method is used in the workplace, which is simply: “a dialogue between [leader] and [participant], instigated by the continual probing questions of the [leader], in a concerted effort to explore the underlying beliefs that shape the [participants] views and opinions, (Conor). This method of leadership fosters environments where a leader is helping others think rather than telling them what they need to think. Socrates treats death as a transition and not something that people should fear. His behavior and beliefs inspire others to remain thoughtful. Through this, it shows his leadership as emotional strength, “but one who is really in love with wisdom and holds firm to this same hope, that he will find it in the grave, and nowhere else worth speaking of—will he then fret at dying and not go thither rejoicing (Socrate 87).

Furthermore, the *Holy Scriptures* also offers an outline for leadership, specifically for pastoral leadership. Values like humility, integrity, and Christlike behavior should be at the forefront of their ministry. In *The Holy Bible*, the qualifications for pastoral ministry are included:

This saying is trustworthy: “If [people] aspire to be an overseer, [they] desire a noble work.” An overseer, therefore, must be above reproach, the [partner] of one [spouse], self-controlled, sensible, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not an excessive drinker,

not a bully but gentle, not quarrelsome, not greedy. [they] must manage [their] own household competently and have [their] children under control with all dignity. (Christian Standard Bible 1 Tim. 3:1-4)

In addition, *Scriptures* are full of leadership examples such as service, humility, and obedience to a higher purpose. Leadership is a service, not a way to control others. A major theme of the scripture is that leaders serve others, “it must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, (Christian Standard Bible Matthew 20:26). In the *Pulpit Commentary* for Matthew, the author states that, “there the governors rule solely for the good of the flock, with no self-seeking, and serving no private interests” (Henry). Jesus modeled this in the same when he washed the feet of the disciples. Yet Jesus made himself lowly because he used His authority for the benefit of those under his authority - his teaching has changed the lives of many. Many leaders throughout *Scripture* follow a higher call, even when it is hard. For example: Moses led the Israelites despite doubt and fear, Abraham shows trust even when he was tested, Peter is the person on whom Christ built his church, yet Peter denied him. Leadership is not just confidence; it is contributing to something that is bigger than oneself and those under their command.

Much like Socrates, many scriptural figures led through suffering and even death. Jesus accepted crucifixion, even when he could have saved himself. Even most of the prophets and apostles faced rejection or persecution. True leadership involves sacrifice, not comfort. Like in *Phaedo*, Socrates’ death was his ultimate act of leadership – Jesus model led the same way. What matters the most is who the leader is internally: true leadership starts with internal motives. The most enduring model of leadership scripturally is not force, but the willingness to serve, suffer, and remain faithful to one’s principles.

Overall, the shift of leadership from ancient Babylon to the early Christian era reveals an important change in the definition of authority. While the *Code of Hammurabi* gave structural accountability and public transparency, it was the intellectual and spiritual change in later works that humanized the role of leader. “Advice of a Sumerian Father to His Son” provides a framework for peacemaking and integrity while in executive positions Sappho’s works of “Very Well, Charaxus,” “Let’s Not Pretend” and “Brothers Poem” emphasize emotional intelligence and the limits of human ability, leadership became a tool for unifying communities rather than just complete control. Furthermore, in Plato’s *Phaedo*, Socrates refined this by showing that true mastery begins with internal knowledge, while the *Holy Scriptures* provided that the ultimate model of leadership is through service and sacrifice. These ancient texts reveal that while policies and handbooks are necessary, an important lesson is that leaders should lead by humility and integrity. In a modern world defined by global power and huge corporations, the lessons from ancient writers are especially relevant. True leadership is not found in the ability to control others, but in the commitment to serve others, follow ethical principles, and inspire a shared story that will endure beyond the leader themselves.

Partial Bibliography

Anonymous. The Advice of a Sumerian Father to His Son. 2200 BCE.

Conor, Peter. "The Socratic Method: Fostering Critical Thinking." *The Institute for Learning and Teaching*, 13 Apr. 2022, <https://tilt.colostate.edu/the-socratic-method/>.

CSB Christian Standard Bible. B&H Publishing Group, 2017.

Dendy, Christina. "Analysis: The Advice of an Akkadian Father to His Son." *EBSCO*, 2021, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/communication-and-mass-media/analysis-advice-akkadian-father-his-son>.

Hammurabi, *Code of Hammurabi* in *Experience Humanities Vol. 1*. Ed. by Matthews, Roy T., et al. McGraw-Hill Education, 2013.

Henry, Spence-Jones. *The Pulpit Commentary, Volume 15*. Delmarva Publications, Inc., 1919.

Jamieson, Robert, et al. *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible: The New Testament: From Galatians to Revelation*. Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997.

Matthews, Roy T., et al. *Experience Humanities Vol. 1*. McGraw-Hill Education, 2013.

Papadimitropoulos, Loukas. "Sappho's 'Brothers Poem': An Interpretation." *Symbolae Osloenses*, vol. 90, no. 1, Jan. 2016, pp. 2–7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00397679.2016.1240960>.

Pfeiffer, R. H. "An Analysis of the Hammurabi Code." *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, vol. 36, no. 4, 1920, pp. 310–15. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/528333>. Accessed 15 Apr. 2026.

Plato, *Phaedo* in *Experience Humanities Vol. 1*. Ed. by Matthews, Roy T., et al. McGraw-Hill Education, 2013.

Prince, J. Dyneley. "The Code of Hammurabi." *The Code of Hammurabi, King of Babylon about 2250 B. C.; The Letters and Inscriptions of Hammurabi; Die Gesetze Hammurabis; Die Gesetze Hammurabis* by Robert Francis Harper et al. *The American Journal of Theology*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1904, pp. 601–09. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3153895>. Accessed 15 Apr. 2026.

Sappho, "Let's Not Pretend" in *Experience Humanities Vol. 1*. Ed. by Matthews, Roy T., et al. McGraw-Hill Education, 2013.

Sappho, "Very Well, Charaxus" in *Experience Humanities Vol. 1*. Ed. by Matthews, Roy T., et al. McGraw-Hill Education, 2013.

Swift, Laura. "Thinking with Brothers in Sappho and Beyond." *Mouseion*, vol. 15, no. 1, Mar. 2018, pp. 71–87, <https://doi.org/10.3138/mous.15.1.6>.