

# Becoming a Leader in the Household: The Wife of Ischomachus as a Model Leader in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*

## Case

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## Abstract

This case study aims to bring an unusual text, Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, into an important contemporary discussion. Written around 370 BCE, the *Oeconomicus* takes the form of a Socratic dialogue and comprises two parts: in the first part Socrates converses with an elite Athenian, Critobulus, about the art of household management and the importance of farming; in the second part Socrates reports a conversation he once had with Ischomachus, who is depicted as the noble Athenian estate manager par excellence. This conversation brings to light the significant role of Ischomachus' wife in the household and raises a series of questions about the role of women as leaders.

This case study encourages students to compare male with female leadership and to test their assumptions regarding women as leaders both in the household and in the public sphere. Furthermore, since the views on women and leadership are part of an embedded narrative (Ischomachus' representation of the way he educated his wife), students will also be challenged to evaluate the role of mansplaining. Finally, the material presented in this case study can be linked with modern leadership theories (such as relational, servant, and transformational leadership).

## Case

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### Learning Outcomes

Students may use this case to:

- Identify leadership qualities, as they are presented in the dialogue, which may be specific to women, and other qualities which may be common between men and women, and establish comparisons between ancient and modern leadership theories (e.g., trait leadership theory).
- Analyze convergences and divergences between leadership within the household and political leadership, and think about the application of the political-leadership-as-household-management analogy in a modern context (e.g., do modern politicians compare the nation to the household? And in which contexts?).
- Think about examples of contemporary women's political leadership and test whether the assumptions of the *Oeconomicus* prevail.
- Compare their own leadership education to the one that the wife of Ischomachus receives, and explain the extent to which they themselves participate in educating leaders.

### Part 1: Education in Leadership: The Wife of Ischomachus as a Partner and as a Leader (Xen. *Oec.* 7)

The wife of Ischomachus appears prominently in chapters 7–10 of Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*<sup>1</sup> (Henderson, Marchant, & Todd, 2013, pp. 438–480).<sup>2</sup> In *Oec.* 7 Ischomachus takes pride that his wife is perfectly capable of “governing the household.” Socrates asks him to explain how he educated his wife. Ischomachus goes on to describe his educational role and experience. The conversation starts with leadership within the household

but eventually provides reflection on political leadership as well. Ischomachus says that when he married his wife she already possessed several important qualities, such as self-restraint, piety, and moderation. His educational role in the first place lies in how he illustrated that both husband and wife should have an equal share in the growth of their household. The wife is astonished by this statement and replies that the only thing she has been taught from her mother is to practice self-control (*sōphronein*). Ischomachus then elaborates on the importance of equal sharing: he states that “moderation for both husband and wife means acting in such a manner that their possessions will be in the best condition possible” (Xen. *Oec.* 7.15; Henderson et al., 2013, p. 445) and that the gods “have established this kind of yoking of male and female, chiefly in order that they may form a *perfect partnership in mutual service*” (Xen. *Oec.* 7.18; Henderson et al., 2013, p. 447). He even compares the tasks of the wife with those of a queen bee in the hive.

Ischomachus defends the traditional division of tasks between men and women (men are more suited to outdoors activities, whereas women should be responsible for the house). Interestingly, however, he does not view the public sphere as superior (“both indoor and outdoor jobs demand work and care”: Xen. *Oec.* 7.21–22; Henderson et al., 2013, p. 447). He does not assign superior qualities or virtues to the man either (“the god granted to both woman and man impartially memory and attention; and so you could not distinguish whether the male or the female sex has the larger share of these”: Xen. *Oec.* 7.26–27; Henderson et al., 2013, p. 449). He goes on to explain in more detail to his wife why the tasks of a woman resemble those of a queen bee: the queen bee takes care that the bees do not remain idle; in the same way, the woman takes care of slaves within the household, makes sure that they perform their work properly, and promotes justice among them. As a result, the woman eventually becomes assimilated into a leader, since she gains the willing obedience of household slaves and everybody wishes to follow her.<sup>3</sup> Ischomachus’ wife is again astonished by this proposal: “It would surprise me if the leader’s activities (*hēgemonos erga*) did not apply to you more than me” (Xen. *Oec.* 7.39; Henderson et al., 2013, p. 455). Ischomachus goes on to relate some leadership tasks of the wife: teaching spinning to slaves, or housekeeping to an ignorant girl, and rewarding and punishing slaves and other servants in the household. He then asserts that “the most pleasant experience of all is to prove yourself better than I am, to make me your servant” (Xen. *Oec.* 7.42; Henderson et al., 2013, p. 455).

#### Consider

- What are the qualities attributed specifically to the wife of Ischomachus and how are those qualities related to the practice of leadership?
- Which virtues are presented as common to Ischomachus and his wife and to what extent are these virtues conducive to good leadership? Could you link the discussion in the *Oeconomicus* with modern trait leadership theory? (see Derue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011).

## Part 2: The Wife of Ischomachus as a Guardian of the Laws, a Commander of Garrison, a Council, and a Queen (Xen. *Oec.* 8–9)

The main focus of chapters 8–9 (Henderson et al., 2013, pp. 456–474) is the praise of order, especially regarding the place of objects within the household. The topic of leadership emerges in two instances. First, when Ischomachus relates how he and his wife chose their housekeeper on the basis of her virtue; interestingly, the qualities of the housekeeper are the same as those required for good leadership: “to have the most self-control in eating, wine drinking, sleeping and intercourse with men, the one, too, who seemed to have the best memory, to be most careful not to offend us by neglecting her duties, and to think most how she could earn some reward by obliging us” (Xen. *Oec.* 9.11; Henderson et al., 2013, p. 471).

Second, when Ischomachus emphasizes again the role of his wife in the household, he resorts to four comparisons: he compares the role of his wife with the role of a guardian of the laws (*nomophulaka*), <sup>4</sup> a commander of garrison (*phourarchos*), a council (*boulē*), and a queen (*basilissan*) who assigns justice: “So I charged my wife to consider herself guardian of the laws to our household, and just as the commander of a garrison inspects his guards, so must she inspect the equipment whenever she thought it well to do so, and to determine whether each item is in good condition, just as the Council scrutinizes the cavalry and the horses. And like a queen, she must to the best of her ability praise and honor the deserving and scold and punish the deficient” (Xen. *Oec.* 9.15; Henderson et al., 2013, p. 473).

Ischomachus finally advises his wife not to be annoyed if he assigns heavier duties to her than to the slaves as regards their possessions. Ischomachus’ wife gladly accepts this; she states that “just as it naturally comes easier to a good woman to care for her own children than to neglect them, so...a good woman finds it more agreeable to look after her own possessions than to neglect them” (Xen. *Oec.* 9.19; Henderson et al., 2013, p. 475). When Socrates hears this, he exclaims: “By Hera, Ischomachus, by your showing, your wife has a truly masculine mind (*andrikēn dianoian*)!” (Xen. *Oec.* 10.1; Henderson et al., 2013, p. 475).

#### Consider

- The virtues of the housekeeper. To what extent are they comparable with the virtues of the wife of Ischomachus, and also with male virtues, such as those required for good leadership?
- Ischomachus’ (political) comparisons. Do you think they imply a belief that the wife could also undertake a political role?
- Socrates’ exclamation that the wife of Ischomachus has a masculine mind. Would this statement imply a certain bias against the female mind?

## Part 3: The Wife of Ischomachus as a Master (Xen. *Oec.* 10)

Chapter 10 treats female makeup as a means of deception: Ischomachus tells Socrates that he advised his wife not to use makeup in order to appear more beautiful. Interestingly, in this section, leadership, in the sense of acting like a master, is associated with a higher form of beauty. When the wife of Ischomachus asks her husband how she could make herself really beautiful instead of merely seeming to be, Ischomachus replies: “Don’t always be sitting around like a slave but try, with the gods’ help, to act like a master (*despotikōs*): stand before the loom and be ready to instruct those who know less than you, and to learn from those who know more; look after the baking maid; stand by the housekeeper when she is measuring out provisions; go round and see whether everything is in its place” (Xen. *Oec.* 10.10; Henderson et al., 2013, p. 479).

#### Consider

- How would you evaluate Ischomachus’ advice to his wife “to act like a master”? Would this be a form of masculinization of the woman?
- How would you evaluate Ischomachus’ role as an educator? Can you view him as a good leader (in the sense of mentor) of his wife?

## Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does the education of the wife of Ischomachus conform to your expectations? In what ways does it differ?
2. Is the wife of Ischomachus a good recipient of education on issues of leadership? Why or why not? Moreover, how would you evaluate the role of mansplaining in Xenophon's narrative?
3. What are the similarities between female leadership in the household and political leadership?
4. According to Ischomachus, can the roles between leader and led (husband and wife) be occasionally reversed? How does this relate to modern theories of servant leadership and followership?
5. Does everybody (Ischomachus, his wife, the housekeeper) have the potential to become a leader? Why or why not?
6. Imagine a business organization with a male and female leader respectively. Are there qualities which characterize specifically female leaders? And which qualities, in your opinion, are necessary for women to succeed in a leadership position?

## Notes

1. Translations of the *Oeconomicus* in this case study and the teaching notes are from Henderson et al., 2013.
2. She is not named, but she has been identified as Chrysis, a woman of otherwise questionable reputation, known from other sources (Harvey, 1984). Xenophon's description does not seem to have negative overtones, so it has been assumed that he aimed to offer a corrective to Chrysis's bad representation. However, anonymity might also indicate that Ischomachus' wife represents a rather universal model.
3. Ischomachus does not use a Greek word for a leader here (such as *archōn* or *hēgemon*), but the ability to gain the willing obedience of followers is considered a basic quality of a successful leader (see, for example, Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 1.3: Xenophon admires Cyrus the Great, precisely because he managed to make many nations follow him willingly).
4. The Greek word refers to an official position in government in ancient Athens.

## Further Reading

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