

How to Run a Company (According to the Media)

A number of big-name media outlets have been publishing more commentary on leadership. Should the C-suite listen?

By Meghan Walsh

It goes as far back as the ancient Greek philosophers, when Plato famously asked, “Who should rule?” (He contended leaders ought to be well-trained—and insisted, naturally enough, they should be philosophers.) In more modern times, business-school professors then built an entire industry on developing leaders for tomorrow. Now comes a new breed of experts on this: the media.

With the topic something of an irresistible buzzword (and, yes, this magazine likes it), media outlets in growing numbers have been appointing “leadership editors” and creating entire sections on leadership. Not surprisingly, skeptics are quickly questioning the trend, asking what these newly minted “experts” can tell society about how to and who should rule.

Apparently, in the media’s view, there’s quite a bit to tell. Dive into one of the many “leadership” tabs appearing on mainstream news sites and you might come out with everything from “five easy tips to becoming your best self” to a detailed look into Howard Schultz’s delicate transition of power at Starbucks. Fast Company’s section on leadership offers career advice, while the Washington Post focuses on

management positions in its “On Leadership” column. Fred Allen, who writes on this topic for Forbes, describes that title’s coverage as a pyramid, with aspirational leadership content serving as the foundation that builds to the C-suite. “It’s a term that’s been growing up,” Allen says.

While no one seems to think journalists have deepened our understanding of how leaders are cultivated, to their credit, they have made the study of it more accessible to more people—even cable networks have designated leadership reporters. And, when done well, the media provides a framework for understanding. “We’re looking for ways to connect the academic research to the world we see around us,” says Lillian Cunningham, host of the Washington Post’s Presidential podcast, which during the election famously took listeners, with journalist as translator, through every executive term since George Washington, in a search to understand each commander-in-chief’s legacy.

The Takeaway

Critiquing leaders is one thing; hands-on experience or training to lead is another.



Still, both editors and reporters typically have little formal training on the topic—give or take a handful who have MBAs. The oversimplification of the medium doesn't help much, either. (Spoiler alert: You can't conquer the global economy in five easy steps.) Meanwhile, expectations change rapidly—simply consider how the country went from electing Obama to Trump. “It’s all action and reaction,” Allen says. And what we expect from women leaders can sometimes be very different than men, points out Fast Company senior editor Kathleen Davis.

To some degree, of course, leadership tendencies are something people are born with or come from the result of some disruption. There is no Abraham Lincoln without the Civil War, for

330 billion

**Google search results on
“corporate leadership”**

example, or even a Jack Welch without General Electric. “Many of our most fundamental leadership models originate deep in our life story,” says Kevin Cashman, a Korn Ferry senior client partner and longtime leadership coach.

But leadership skills can certainly be sharpened, so a growing number of aspiring chiefs are trying hands-on leadership training. Results can be mixed, but case studies have shown some promising results. Made aware early on of their strengths and weaknesses, and provided a roadmap for growth in leadership, a surprising number of alumni from these courses have wound up in senior ranks, or even became CEOs over time. That’s a high bar for any media organization’s leadership section to beat. ●