THE LEADERS WHO PREVENT CRISES ARE OFTEN THE HARDEST TO SEE

Martin Gutmann argues that organisations reward drama, confidence, and visible activity even when better leadership operates through preparation, judgment, and humility.



THE ARGUMENT

"We confuse a good story with good leadership."

The leader who creates a crisis and then performs heroically is easier to notice than the leader whose preparation prevents the crisis. That visibility bias shapes whom organisations admire, promote, and imitate.

BY HR WEEK EDITORIAL

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THE ACTION FALLACY

Why the wrong candidate keeps winning

Leadership stories favour the person who survives a dramatic failure over the person whose preparation makes failure less likely.

Gutmann frames the leadership problem as a hiring decision. Candidate A has achieved the four major polar goals and was first to accomplish three of them. Candidate B has attempted four Antarctic expeditions, each ending in failure, catastrophe, or death. Asked to choose a captain, a rational hiring panel would select Candidate A.

Yet leadership culture has repeatedly done the opposite. Candidate B is Ernest Shackleton, celebrated in bestselling books, documentaries, consulting material, and business-school cases. Candidate A is Roald Amundsen, whom Gutmann presents as the most successful polar explorer in history - and as a figure largely absent from leadership studies.

In a quick search of his business school's library catalogue, Gutmann found 170 books and articles treating Shackleton as a leadership model. He found six on Amundsen, four written by Gutmann himself. His search of Polish LinkedIn produced the same imbalance: admiration for Shackleton and silence around Amundsen.

The attachment is not purely analytical. Gutmann recalls criticising prominent political leaders in international newspapers without provoking the hostility he received after questioning Shackleton's status as a leadership icon. The response suggests that heroic leadership stories become part of how people understand courage, identity, and competence.

Gutmann calls the underlying bias the action fallacy: the mistaken belief that the best leaders are those who generate the most noise and sensational activity in the most dramatic circumstances. Action is visible. Prevention is not. Recovery creates suspense. Preparation removes it.

The result is a distorted selection mechanism. Organisations evaluate the quality of the story rather than the quality of the leadership. A dramatic rescue can eclipse the decisions that made rescue necessary, while a calm result can make disciplined leadership look ordinary.

THE VISIBILITY TRAP

Dramatic recovery is easy to narrate and reward. Quiet prevention removes the very evidence that would make the leader noticeable.

WHEN CRISIS CREATES THE HERO

A crisis can make weak leadership look heroic

The relevant question is not only how a leader responds under pressure, but how much of that pressure their earlier decisions created.



Gutmann contrasts Roald Amundsen and Ernest Shackleton on the HR WEEK Warsaw stage.

Shackleton's best-known story is the Endurance expedition. After setting out in 1914, the ship became trapped and was eventually crushed by Antarctic ice. Shackleton and his men crossed the ice and some of the world's roughest seas before reaching safety in 1916. Gutmann does not dispute the tenacity involved. He disputes what the story proves.

On Gutmann's account, the crisis was not an unforeseeable test imposed on an otherwise sound expedition. Shackleton disregarded warnings from local whalers about unusually dangerous ice and carried serious weaknesses in crew selection, equipment, and training. The expedition's second ship, the Aurora, suffered a still graver crisis in which three people died.

A compelling rescue story therefore obscures the leadership decisions that preceded it. The visible portion begins when the ice closes in. The less dramatic but more consequential portion begins much earlier, when advice is weighed, capabilities are assessed, and risk is accepted.

Amundsen's expeditions offer the opposite problem: they make poor drama. In 1905, Gutmann notes, Amundsen navigated the Northwest Passage in a small fishing vessel after the British Navy had failed for decades. In 1911, he completed a 3,000-kilometre journey to the South Pole and returned to base after 99 days - one day away from his schedule.

Gutmann uses the image of two swimmers. One enters a river carelessly, begins to drown, fights spectacularly, and drags himself back to shore. Observers praise the struggle. The other studies the currents and her own limits, enters at the right place and time, and lets the river carry her across. The crossing looks easy because the judgment was good.

The lesson is not to avoid action. It is to recognise that action is often downstream of judgment. Preparation, learning, and risk reduction may generate fewer heroic moments precisely because they are effective.

THE OFFICE VERSION

Organisations reward the appearance of leadership

The action fallacy moves directly from heroic stories into promotion decisions, performance reviews, and everyday status.



Martin Gutmann at HR WEEK Warsaw.

Gutmann argues that the same bias shaping our view of polar explorers shapes the office. The Shackletons become role models, earn promotions, and receive bonuses. The Amundsens - people whose planning and judgment reduce drama - are easier to overlook.

He points to organisational research showing that people infer leadership potential from how much someone speaks, regardless of what is said; from visible confidence, regardless of competence; and from constant busyness, regardless of what the activity achieves. These are convenient signals because they are easy to observe. They are weak evidence of contribution.

When promotion systems favour performance of leadership over the work of leadership, the consequences extend beyond a single bad appointment. The people doing careful, preventive work learn that their contribution is undervalued. Teams learn that visibility matters more than substance. Confidence becomes a career strategy.

The cycle then reproduces itself. Gutmann cites leadership scholar Keith Grint's observation that when organisations reward people who handle crises but ignore those whose management prevents them, people learn to seek out situations that can be framed as crises.

This does not require deliberate sabotage. A leader can simply become less interested in patient maintenance, early warnings, or unglamorous coordination. A chronic emergency provides an audience, concentrates authority, and creates a visible stage on which decisiveness can be performed.

Quiet leadership is not passivity. Amundsen acted, innovated, and made consequential decisions. The difference is that action followed study rather than substituting for it. Organisations need evidence systems capable of seeing that difference.

"Appearing to be an effective leader rather than actually being one" can determine who advances.

A BETTER LEADERSHIP TEST

Evaluate what happened before the dramatic moment

Leadership assessment improves when organisations distinguish visible intervention from the judgment, preparation, and learning that shape outcomes.

The action fallacy persists because evaluation usually begins too late. Once a crisis is visible, the organisation watches the response: who takes charge, communicates forcefully, works the longest hours, and projects certainty. The history of the crisis receives less attention.

Gutmann's contrast suggests a different evidence window. Review the decisions made when there was still time to prevent the problem. Which warnings were available? Who sought local knowledge? Were weaknesses in the team, equipment, or plan acknowledged? Did the leader test assumptions and adapt before circumstances removed the choice?

The same logic applies to success. A calm delivery should not be dismissed as easy. Investigators should ask what made it calm: disciplined selection, rehearsal, sequencing, contingency planning, or careful matching of capability to risk. Good leadership may be most visible in the problems that do not materialise.

Promotion decisions also need a longer time horizon. A crisis captain can look exceptional during a quarter while leaving behind a system that generates the next emergency. A quieter leader may build routines, judgment, and trust that make performance sustainable after the spotlight moves on.

This approach changes the conversation from charisma to causality. It asks not who looked most like a leader, but whose choices improved the probability of a good outcome and strengthened the team's capacity to perform again.

The method is demanding because prevention produces counterfactual evidence: the organisation must reason about what might have happened without the leader's work. Yet that difficulty is not an excuse to fall back on the easiest signals. It is the core measurement challenge Gutmann's argument exposes.

PROMOTION AUDIT

1. What did the candidate prevent?
2. Which warnings did they seek and use?
3. Did activity improve the outcome or only visibility?
4. Is this leader repeatedly surrounded by emergencies?
5. What capability remains after they leave?
6. Who else created the success?

EDITORIAL SYNTHESIS

These questions translate Gutmann's action-fallacy argument into a practical review of leadership evidence. They are not presented as a formal assessment instrument.

THE LEADERSHIP SUPERPOWER

Humility is not softness. It is operational discipline.

The leader who can recognise others' strengths, revise a belief, and admit a limit gives the team more intelligence to work with.



Martin Gutmann at HR WEEK Warsaw.

To identify what quieter, more effective leaders do differently, Gutmann turns to humility. He first describes a study by Harvard's David Deming. Some teams were led by the person who most wanted to be in charge; others received a randomly assigned leader. The teams with randomly chosen leaders performed better, consistently and significantly, in Gutmann's account.

The finding challenges a familiar shortcut: the strongest desire to lead is not reliable evidence of the ability to lead. Gutmann's explanation is that people who most want authority may lack the ingredient that allows a team to contribute beyond the leader's own knowledge.

Research on humility, he argues, links it with greater productivity, innovation, problem solving, satisfaction, and trust. Humility also creates what researchers call team potency: a shared drive and belief in the team's capacity to perform. The leader's stance spreads through the group.

This is not self-effacement. It is a disciplined relationship to evidence, other people, and one's own fallibility. A humble leader can still set direction and act decisively. The difference is that authority does not require pretending to possess every answer.

THREE ELEMENTS OF LEADERSHIP HUMILITY

VALUE CONTRIBUTION

Appreciate other people's strengths and contributions in a substantive way - recognising what each person brings rather than offering token praise.

REMAIN TEACHABLE

Stay open to ideas and feedback. Move through the world knowing that some current answers may be incomplete and some beliefs may be wrong.

OWN LIMITS

Acknowledge limits and failures publicly. Make uncertainty and responsibility discussable rather than protecting authority through certainty.

THE OWNERSHIP TEST

Success is shared. Failure is owned.

A leader's willingness to state uncertainty and accept responsibility is one of the clearest ways humility becomes visible in practice.

Gutmann illustrates public acknowledgment of limits with Jacinda Ardern's leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. He points to her unusually high trust ratings and to statements that rejected false certainty: 'We will never pretend we have all the answers.' The message did not eliminate authority. It located authority inside an honest account of uncertainty.

His second example is Dwight D. Eisenhower on the eve of the D-Day landings. After speaking with British, Canadian, and American paratroopers - some of whom would be flown by Polish pilots - Eisenhower returned to his cabin and prepared a note in case the invasion failed.

The draft initially referred to 'this particular operation.' Eisenhower crossed out the impersonal phrase and made the responsibility his own: 'If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt, it is mine alone.' He underlined the sentence and kept the note in his wallet. The invasion succeeded, so he never had to issue it.

Gutmann's interpretation is direct. Eisenhower could have blamed intelligence, weather, logistics, allies, or chance. Instead, success would belong to everyone and failure would belong to him. The act combined accountability with respect for the contribution and bravery of the people carrying out the decision.

The example closes the loop between humility and the action fallacy. Humility helps a leader seek expertise before a crisis, revise a view while options remain open, and own a decision after the outcome is known. Those behaviours reduce drama, distribute credit, and make learning possible.

They also make leadership harder to spot. The loud, certain, crisis-driven figure remains easier to narrate. Gutmann's challenge to organisations is therefore not simply to admire a different personality type. It is to change what counts as evidence: reward the leader who listens before acting, prevents avoidable failure, strengthens the team, and accepts responsibility without manufacturing a heroic role for themselves.

THE MANAGEMENT QUESTION

Does your organisation know how to recognise the leader who makes success look uneventful - or only the one who looks impressive when events go wrong?

EDITOR'S NOTE

This article develops ideas shared by Martin Gutmann at HR WEEK Warsaw. It is based strictly on the recorded presentation; historical and research claims are presented as attributed in the talk and have not been independently verified.