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https://www.ted.com/talks/martin_gutmann_are_we_celebrating_the_wrong_leaders
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DU06c7f9fzc>

Martin Gutmann is an author, speaker and scholar interested in how the past can help **shed light on** today's **most pressing challenges**. He is a professor at the Lucerne School of Business and a lecturer at ETH Zurich, both in Switzerland, and **the best-selling author of *The Unseen Leader: How History Can Help Us Rethink Leadership***. Born in Sweden, Gutmann has also lived and worked in Japan, the US, Canada, Mauritius, Germany and Switzerland.

We tend to **celebrate leaders for** their dramatic words and actions in times of crisis — but we often **overlook** truly great leaders who avoid the crisis **to begin with**. Historian Martin Gutmann **challenges us to rethink** what effective leadership actually looks like. **To make his point**, Gutmann **draws on** contemporary research and historical examples, including the **famed but disaster-prone** Ernest Shackleton.

This talk was given at a TEDx event using the TED conference format but independently organized by a local community. Learn more at <https://www.ted.com/tedx>

- 1) We tend to **celebrate** leaders for their dramatic words and actions in times of crisis — but we often **overlook** truly great leaders who avoid the crisis **to begin with** (intro).
- 2) And in the centuries since, one of them has been **consistently celebrated** as a leadership role model in best-selling books, blogs, documentaries, podcasts and an endless stream of social media posts (17).
- 3) I did a quick search in my university's library catalogue before this talk, and I found **no fewer than** 26 books that **celebrate** Shackleton's leadership qualities (24).
- 4) Well, I'm a historian who studies leadership, and I'm here to tell you we **celebrate** the wrong leaders (30).
- 5) We **celebrate** the wrong leaders (38).
- 6) But for this reason, it's important that we **celebrate** the right leaders because the leaders we **celebrate** are the leaders we learn from (45).
- 7) And so **in this sense**, the leaders we **celebrate** have a direct impact on the success or as it may be, failure, of our greatest **endeavors** today (47).
- 8) So why do we **celebrate** the wrong leaders? (49)
- 9) Rarely highlighted in the many books that **celebrate** his [T: Shackleton's] leadership qualities is the fact that the expedition's other ship, the Aurora, **suffered an even graver crisis**, the result of which was three lost lives (91).
- 10) I arrived at it through my work as a historian interested in why we **celebrate** some leaders of the past, but not others (113).
- 11) And perhaps **worst of all**, it's a **self-perpetuating cycle** because by **celebrating** these **flawed**, action-oriented leaders, we're actively creating more of them (134).
- 12) Instead, we need to learn to **celebrate** those who **mitigate** rather than promote drama (157).
- 13) The **action fallacy** tricks us into **celebrating** the wrong leaders (177).

1. **00:03** I would like to invite you on a little thought experiment.
2. Let's pretend that we're going on a polar expedition together.
3. All of you and me. And we need to hire a captain.
4. And we have two **resumes** in front of us.
5. **00:21** One comes from a man who has already successfully achieved
6. all four of the major polar goals: the North Pole and the South Pole,
7. and the Northeast and the Northwest Passage. In fact, three of these,
8. he was the first person to **accomplish**. Let's call him candidate A.
9. **00:42** Candidate B is a man who **set off for** the Antarctic four times,
10. three times as the man **in charge**, and every time **resulted in** failure,
11. catastrophe or death. Who should we hire?
12. **01:04** It's **not meant to be** a trick question. I think it's obvious we want candidate A.
13. He's **the man for the job**. But, in reality, we often **trick ourselves into**
14. hiring candidate B or someone like him.



15. **01:22** How do I know? Well, both of these men were real polar explorers
16. who lived during the so-called Heroic Age of Polar exploration.
17. And in the centuries since, one of them has been **consistently celebrated** as
18. a leadership role model in best-selling books, blogs, documentaries, podcasts
19. and an endless stream of social media posts.
20. **01:48** But surprisingly, shockingly, this is not candidate A, but candidate B,
21. the very much **disaster-prone** Anglo-Irish explorer Ernest Shackleton.
22. Meanwhile, candidate A, the Norwegian Roald Amundsen,
23. by any metric the most successful polar explorer to have ever lived,
24. has been **largely** forgotten. I did a quick search in my university's
25. library catalogue before this talk, and I found **no fewer than** 26 books
26. that **celebrate** Shackleton's leadership qualities.
27. For Amundsen, I found four, two of which I wrote (laughter).
28. **02:34** What is going on here? Why are we **obsessed with a mediocre**, at best,
29. leader and **overlooking** a truly gifted one?
30. **02:51** Well, I'm a historian who studies leadership, and I'm here to tell you
31. we **celebrate** the wrong leaders. And not just **in the realm of** polar exploration.
32. Have you heard of Toussaint Louverture?
33. You probably **discuss him** around the coffee machines in the mornings.
34. Maybe not, but you should. He **was born an illiterate slave**
35. and rose to become one of the most influential revolutionaries ever
36. and **outsmarted** the biggest empires of the day, including Napoleon's.
37. What about Frances Perkins? She was the pillar in US President
38. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's famous New Deal. We celebrate the wrong leaders.
39. **03:37** And this is not just an academic or a trivial insight.
40. Leadership development today is a 60-billion-dollar industry.
41. For a good reason. We need leaders, right?
42. All the challenges that we face today require people to work together,
43. and this **in turn** requires somebody who can motivate them, inspire them,
44. coordinate the work, deal with whatever **hiccups** might arise **along the way**.
45. **04:09** But for this reason, it's important that we **celebrate** the right leaders
46. because the leaders we **celebrate** are the leaders we learn from.
47. And so **in this sense**, the leaders we **celebrate** have a direct impact on the success
48. or as it may be, failure, of our greatest **endeavors** today.
49. **04:33** So why do we **celebrate** the wrong leaders?
50. Sometimes **it comes down to** pure racism and sexism.
51. We have **a well-documented bias for** associating leadership with white men.
52. But there's another **culprit** at work as well, what I like to call the action fallacy.
53. Our mistaken belief that the best leaders are those who generate the most noise,
54. action and sensational activity in the most dramatic circumstances.
55. **05:03** In other words, we confuse a good story for good leadership.
56. But the two are not the same. **As a matter of fact**, very often,
57. good leadership will **result in** a bad story. Let me explain.
58. **05:20** Imagine leadership for one moment,
59. not as a polar explorer **charting a new course** or a CEO motivating her staff,
60. but as the simple act of swimming across a river. And not just any river.
61. Imagine **a violent river** with waves crashing together

62. and rocks **lurking** somewhere below the surface.
63. If a swimmer **ventures** in **haphazardly**,
64. without being **aware of** his own capabilities or the currents, and nearly drowns,
65. but splashes around wildly, fights with all his strength,
66. and somehow miraculously manages to drag himself back to safety,
67. those of us **looking on**, will notice him, and we will probably say,
68. "Wow, what a guy! He really fought hard to get himself out of that crisis."
69. **06:21** And **if instead** we have a swimmer who has studied the river for years
70. and knows just where and when to enter the water
71. and how to turn her body **in subtle ways**, and so lets the current carry her across,
72. we probably won't notice her. And if we do, we would probably say,
73. "Meh, that looks pretty easy." (laughter)
74. **06:51** Shackleton and Amundsen are a case in point.
75. Shackleton, our candidate B, is best known for his **ill-fated "Endurance"** expedition,
76. which **set off** in the summer of 1914 and saw his ship become trapped
77. and **eventually** crushed by the ice **off Antarctica**.
78. And he and his men were then forced to **undertake** a dangerous trek across the ice
79. and **braved** some of the stormiest seas on Earth
80. before finally **reaching the safety** of South Georgia in the summer of 1916.
81. **07:22** Now, Shackleton was a **tenacious** man, no doubt,
82. and his is a **captivating story fit for Hollywood**.
83. In fact, it was made into a TV series **starring** a young Kenneth Branagh.
84. But, it is not a story fit to draw leadership lessons from.
85. **Be as admirable as those** efforts were,
86. the crisis that **beset him** was largely **self-inflicted**.
87. He overlooked the advice from local whalers,
88. who told him the ice was particularly dangerous that season,
89. and he overlooked **massive deficits in** his equipment, preparation,
90. crew selection and training.
91. **08:06** And it gets worse. Rarely highlighted in the many books
92. that **celebrate** his leadership qualities is the fact
93. that the expedition's other ship, the Aurora, **suffered an even graver crisis**,
94. the result of which was three lost lives.
95. **08:25** In contrast, the expeditions of Roald Amundsen **make for boring reading**.
96. Not because he was lucky, but because, based on his **intimate knowledge of**
97. the polar environment, his careful and **deliberate** planning,
98. and his authentic and innovative leadership in the field, he managed to reduce
99. the problems that his team **encountered to a bare minimum**.
100. **08:51** In 1905, he achieved, in a **tiny** fishing vessel,
101. what the mighty British Navy had failed to do the previous eight decades:
102. to find and navigate the Northwest Passage above the Canadian **mainland**.
103. In 1911, he reached the South Pole, a journey of 3,000 kilometers
104. across hazardous and **uncharted terrain**, and arrived back
105. at his camp after 99 days, **just one day off his planned schedule**.
106. **09:24** If Shackleton is the swimmer who rushes **recklessly** into the water
107. without understanding the currents or his own **capabilities**,
108. Amundsen is the swimmer who has spent a lifetime

109. **humbly** studying the river before entering the water **in just the right spot,**
110. **at just the right time,** and so makes it look easy.
111. **09:47** Now **the action fallacy** causes real problems,
112. and not just for **our interpretation of the past,** right?
113. I arrived at it through my work as a historian interested in
114. why we **celebrate** some leaders of the past, but not others.
115. But it's a dangerous **feature** in our offices today as well, because after all,
116. the same biases and misconceptions that we bring to our reading of the past
117. **are one and the same with** which we view leadership in our offices today.
118. **10:19** It is the Shackletons of our offices **rather than** the Amundsens,
119. who serve as role models, who get promoted and who **get rewarded.**
120. In fact, this is something studies in organizational psychology
121. have confirmed. We see leadership potential in people who speak more,
122. **regardless of** what they say (laughter).
123. **10:42** In people who **appear confident,** regardless of
124. how competent they are. And we have an **unyielding** admiration for
125. people who are **perpetually** busy, regardless of what they're actually doing.
126. **10:57** I see some of you are imagining specific people
127. in your office right now. Don't worry, we won't tell them.
128. **11:04** In other words, appearing to be a good leader,
129. **rather than** actually being one **behind the scenes,** is the path to
130. fame and bonus and promotion today.
131. And this causes all kinds of problems. **With the wrong leaders in charge,**
132. organizations are obviously **not performing at their full potential.**
133. And it creates a toxic culture in which those actually doing good work
134. **feel overlooked** and demotivated. And perhaps **worst of all,**
135. it's a **self-perpetuating cycle** because by **celebrating** these **flawed,**
136. action-oriented leaders, we're actively creating more of them.
137. So this is a problem that we need to solve.
138. **11:47** The good news is we can. And it starts with **reimagining**
139. what good leadership looks like. And there's two sides to this.
140. First, we have to learn to ignore what we can call the captains of crisis,
141. the Shackletons, those who are **lurching** from one dramatic circumstance
142. to another. While some crises can't be avoided, many are self-inflicted
143. or **amplified by** poor leadership, or sometimes
144. just a **figment of** their imagination.
145. **12:19** Keith Grint, the **preeminent** scholar of leadership today,
146. brilliantly summarizes this problematic dynamic. "Since we reward people
147. who are good in crises, and ignore people who are such good managers
148. that there are few crises, people soon learn
149. to seek out or reframe situations as crises."
150. We need to **disincentivize** this style of leadership by refusing
151. to give these people the attention they **crave.**
152. And that's easy when **we're confronted with the sober facts.**
153. Ahmanson's four successes, Shackleton's four failures.
154. But **as soon as** it's embedded in a story, the dramatic details

155. **pull us in like a magnet** and give us a **false sense of inspiration**.
156. False, because **there's no real substance** there.
157. **13:08** Instead, we need to learn to **celebrate** those who **mitigate**
158. rather than promote drama. And this can be challenging
159. because often they do so **in very subtle ways** below the surface of the water,
160. in the case of our swimmer, right? They're obsessive planners.
161. They build processes that **align the organization's strengths**
162. **with the unique challenges they face**.
163. And they're authentic and create cultures that bring out the best in people.
164. **13:37** Harvard Business School professor Raffaella Sadun
165. has studied the profound impact this behind-the-scenes work can have,
166. and she has given it a name.
167. I don't want to give you too many technical, academic terms here,
168. but this is an important one, she calls it boring management (laughter).
169. **13:58** But as she tells us from her research, **the evidence is clear**
170. that boring management matters. It may not be as exciting as
171. leading a **cavalry charge** from the front or **giving a brash pep talk**,
172. but it's the real toolkit of good leaders.
173. **14:18** And to me, **making a difference from behind the scenes**,
174. **unconcerned with** what other people are thinking,
175. unconcerned with spilling **self-aggrandizing** words, or exaggerating,
176. such people are truly inspirational. Let me summarize.
177. **14:40** The action fallacy tricks us into **celebrating** the wrong leaders.
178. And this comes with huge costs. We can overcome it.
179. I would say we must overcome it. And this starts with **reimagining**
180. what good leadership looks like. So the next time you're in a position
181. to judge or reward a leader, or maybe just the next time you're trying
182. to figure out whose efforts actually guided your team or organization
183. to success, **resist the temptation to be dazzled by tales** of adventure
184. and **derring-do**, and take a moment to **look below the surface**
185. or in the quieter corners of your team.
186. **15:24** And this is important, because the next time your organization is faced
187. with **the equivalent of** the ice pack **looming** on the horizon,
188. who do you want **in charge**?
189. The leader who responds to the ship freezing in place by frantically
190. **cranking** the engine, unpacking the **crates** of dynamite,
191. and pushing his men **to their breaking point**?
192. Or the leader who avoids **getting stuck** in the ice **in the first place**?
193. **15:53** Thank you (applause).

