

# LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM THE KARDASHIANS

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Exploring Effective Leadership Practices  
Through Popular Culture

# LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM THE KARDASHIANS

**Bodies, Emotions, Success**

By

**Brigitte Biehl**

*SRH Berlin University of Applied Sciences, Germany*



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Brigitte Biehl** (she/her), PhD, is a Professor for Media and Communication Management at SRH Berlin University of Applied Sciences, Berlin, Germany. She held a Guest Professorship for Gender & Queer Studies in Leadership at the Faculty of Business Administration and Economics, FernUniversität in Hagen, Germany, where she also works as a Researcher. Her background is in theater, film, and media studies and business studies. She worked in business schools in the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. In Berlin, she directs the BA Creative Industries Management and the MA International Management “Creative Leadership” and teaches management, leadership, and artistic research. She is the Director of the IWK Institute for Professional Development at SRH which uses artistic methods for leadership development.

Her work is widely published in journals such as *Management Learning*; *Journal of Management Studies*; *Leadership*; *Gender, Work & Organization* and in marketing research journals. She has written books on *Leadership in Game of Thrones* (Palgrave Macmillan 2021), *Dance and Organization* (Routledge 2017), and on aesthetics, art, and management. Her recent work on learning with film also appeared as a chapter in the latest edition of *The SAGE Handbook of Leadership* in 2023. Other contributions about creative approaches to leadership appeared in *Business Ethics Quarterly* and leadership outlets. She is an Associate Editor of *Organizational Aesthetics* and an International Board Member of *Management Learning* and an Editorial Board Member of *Leadership*.

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# LEARNING LESSONS FOR LEADERSHIP FROM THE KARDASHIANS

## WELCOME TO THIS BOOK

This is the first book about gender and leadership in the *Exploring Effective Leadership Practices Through Popular Culture* series. Although women work hard to advance their careers, they remain underrepresented in leadership positions and positions of power. Many other individuals who do not comply with the traditional stereotype of the male leader face manifold barriers that inhibit their careers. Scholarly research on gender and leadership has explored many of the subtle and often invisible barriers that cause this disadvantage and send women's career paths into a "labyrinth" (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 63). Among the barriers that hinder their advancement is the traditionally strong masculine bias of leadership, which is reflected in the "think leader, think male" phenomenon (Schein, 1973). When we think of a leader, we think of masculine characteristics and appearance. However, popular culture has begun to show us many different leaders in the broader sense.

The women of the Kardashian–Jenner family have amassed immense fortunes and social media followings and run many different companies. These women are simply everywhere, and the mother–manager of the family, Kris Jenner, once rightly stated that we just "cannot escape them" (McClain, 2014, p. 1). This book draws on gender and leadership theories and discusses central issues with reference to these women to help you improve your practice. Even though the Kardashians seem to have escaped the "labyrinth," they struggle with many issues that affect all women who

work and those who aspire to leadership positions. These issues revolve around their female bodies, which are historically displaced in management and leadership settings, emotions that do not comply with rational leadership ideals, motherhood, and issues of race and class that also disadvantage many ambitious individuals. Even though the Kardashians are contested, they have approached “leadership” in new ways and provide some ideas of how to do things differently. A critical look also reveals how they reinforce gendered stereotypes that have hampered many women’s careers. Nevertheless, they open many avenues to approach leadership differently and may inspire you to reflect on aspects that you have not previously considered and to modify or reject views of “leadership” so that you can find your own way.

The purpose of this book is to explain gender and leadership theories by drawing on popular culture. The readers, in turn, can put these insights into practice to influence their own management and leadership activities. The following model is employed in the book series: Leadership Theories → Pop Culture Examples → Practice of Leaders. Gender and leadership theories have been widely and empirically researched in academic scholarship and describe issues that are vividly and emotionally illustrated in popular culture. These theories also influence us in our own work life and in a variety of different contexts where “leadership” happens.

I was excited to write this book because I have conducted research on gender and leadership throughout the past years, in which I explored many of the often-invisible barriers for women and applied the medium of film to further people’s understanding and recommend change (Biehl & Schönfeld, 2023; Biehl et al., 2022). This builds on my research on the use of film in management education and leadership development.

Including this book series, it has now become accepted that we can use film to learn about leadership. To become a meaningful experience, films do not need to be office series with a direct relationship to corporate reality. Rather, any film that speaks to our contemporary experience can be utilized. On this basis, many different movies referenced in this book series have been investigated with regard to leadership issues. Popular culture offers experiences that we can work with and also presents new leader models that have not (yet) found their way into management textbooks (Biehl & Satama, 2023). Film as part of popular culture is not only entertainment or an escape from everyday life but also offers “a mode of knowledge and expression that is different, and value-adding, to more conventional

academic knowledge” (Rhodes, 2016, p. 129). This insight resonates with media scholarship that emphasizes the power of entertainment media as an important source for us to make sense of ourselves, our work, and our lives. It is widely acknowledged that individuals use TV series and films to work through their emotions, challenges, and disappointments with the aim of handling their lives better (Ang, 1985). Before I elaborate on this issue in one of the following subsections, I shall now outline the understanding of leadership on which this book is based.

## LEADERSHIP

This book does not use the Kardashians as female “leader” role models but applies gender and leadership theory to their actions. Thus, we do not take individual family members as examples for good leadership, even though the basis for this book is a reality TV show in which the Kardashians have their own business endeavors, occupy formal leader roles, and work in corporate offices where they lead other people. In their reality TV show, we also observe some of the practices of the mother and manager, “momager,” Kris Jenner who has grown the family’s business success. However, rather than seeking examples of leaders and their traits, the book frames their actions and other people’s reactions “as leadership” to identify many of the hidden barriers that women encounter on a daily basis when either working in an organization or being self-employed.

Definitions of leadership are varied, plural, and contested. Leadership has become both a hype and ubiquitous phenomenon that is described in different ways and includes leader roles in organizations, abstract ideas of thought leadership and all kinds of social influence (Learmonth & Morrel, 2019). In the most general sense, leadership is an everyday phenomenon that occurs wherever people come together and work on something with a solution-oriented approach – for example, in groups of friends, families, and sports teams. Who is leading may depend on the moment, on their personal abilities, energy, and commitment, and on the situation in which one person may seem particularly important (Weibler, 2023, p. 31). This book views leadership as everybody’s responsibility. Thus, it is important that everybody knows how leadership works, even if you may not hold a formal leader position.

Leadership is seen here as a distinctly social phenomenon whereby different individuals interact and influence each other. Leadership is a relationship (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), which may include formal leader roles and others who are followers. Leaders, in exercising influence, act upon others, and others respond to these actions. However, it is not only about one individual – or one heroic person – and their traits and behaviors as a leader, which would mean that “leadership” exclusively depends on a formal position. Leadership ever so often does not work in a top-down manner, as others do not always follow. Leadership needs to be attributed and accepted. Consequently, we find individuals at work who are leaders even though they do not occupy a formal leader role. In many situations, different individuals are taking the lead. This understanding is reflected in a broad range of contemporary leadership research that analyzes leadership as a sort of relationship, whereby leaders and followers play interdependent roles in generating leadership. Leadership in this view is co-created between individuals, is continuously negotiated and resisted, and is not a static position but an ongoing process (Endres & Weibler, 2017).

Within this relational process that is leadership, not only rationality matters. Rather, leadership can be considered an “irrationally based, relational phenomenon” (Ladkin, 2023, p. 274). In a leadership relation, all kinds of assessments pertaining to a person’s gender, race, class, body, sexuality, demeanor, language, and other characteristics become relevant. These forms of assessment happen through our “aesthetic” perception that occurs through our senses (vision, hearing, touch, smell, and taste) and embodied perceptions. Based on these perceptions, we may trust a person or reject a person, depending on how we assess their appearance, voice, body language, or way of speaking. We may or may not approve of their voice, their appearance, or their body language and other things.

This is where gender comes in. Whether individuals are accepted in a leader role or not often depends on their gender. Many of these mechanisms negatively affect women because their behavior is assessed differently from men’s behavior, solely because of the gender and social stereotypes attached to it. Leaders can be successful only if other people acknowledge their leadership. This depends on the perception of others, even if their evaluations are tainted by prejudice and discrimination. Women historically have faced disadvantages because they do not match the typical (male) leader image. For others, bias along the lines of race and class influences how they are

perceived and judged. These topics will also be further explained in subsequent sections.

At this point, we need to accept that leadership and the attribution of leadership is not only objective based on competence but also subjective based on evaluations. Ladkin (2023, p. 274) emphasizes that our aesthetic perception (through our five senses) precedes rational judgment and emotional reactions:

*Prior to emotional engagement or reasoned argument, aesthetic perception is the spark that hooks potential followers' attention both to the possibility that an individual might best suit the situation in relation to their ability "to lead" and to where that individual thinks it is important to go.*

Leadership relies on our embodied awareness and our senses through which we perceive the world and make sense of it (Ladkin, 2023). We need our sensual capacities and perception, including our "gut feeling" and intuition, to interact with others, "read the room," relate to other people, assess their mood and intentions, empathize with their condition, understand their value system, perceive situations in their entirety, and much more. Ladkin (2023, p. 280) reminds us that "followers are continuously accumulating sensory data – and making aesthetically based, pre-cognitive judgements – about those they choose to follow." Regardless of our role in leadership, we are always giving off information through our appearance, gender, and demeanor that are perceived and judged by others and that influence whether they are willing to accept us as "leaders" or whether they see us as, for example, "competent" or "reliable." Sensual perception is always "on" and influences how we interact and how we understand ourselves and others.

In this book, we work with film that is an illustrative, visual, acoustic, and capturing artistic medium that helps us train our sensual perception for leadership interaction. Many of these irrational, human interactions are presented in film and can be discussed with regard to theory to learn about leadership, including gender and leadership. We will examine what happens between people and then take a step back to apply theory so that we can achieve a critical distance to our aesthetic judgment. This approach is needed because our "gut feeling" is important but pre-rational and is often entangled in social bias and prejudice that can be misogynist, racist, homophobic, among other things, and should not covertly determine our actions.

## LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

When we conceive of leadership as an interactive and co-created process, breaking down the distinction between leader and follower, leadership development becomes everyone's job. Historically, "leader" development has been defined as an expansion of a person's capacity to be effective in leadership roles and processes. Leader development, when restricted to "high-potentials" only, is elitist and exclusive and potentially ineffective as good leaders are no guarantee that good leadership will result. Good followers are needed as well. After all, leadership involves a dynamic social interaction. Today, when we think of leadership as something that happens between people, leadership development is seen as "enhancing the capacity of a collective (such as a team or organization) to engage in leadership" (Day et al., 2021, p. 3). This includes to "understand, predict, and intervene effectively in addressing the questions of how: (a) individuals develop as leaders, and (b) collections of individuals develop a capacity for leadership" (Day et al., 2021, p. 1). Everybody can make efforts to develop their knowledge, skills, and abilities and views on leadership to make a positive contribution. Not only those in formal leadership positions but also those who lead from time to time and those who follow are responsible for leadership. Thus, you can learn with film even if you do not occupy a formal leadership position and do not consider yourself a "leader" (yet). You can develop yourself when you have realized that you have the power to influence leadership processes in various contexts. Individuals may have a considerable impact as followers in leadership relationships, when they temporarily take on informal leadership roles, and when they influence leadership in small or large groups.

Leadership development can start now, as it is understood to happen across the lifespan. Leadership development includes higher education and structured development initiatives for individuals or collectives in organizations as well as informal and self-directed activities inside and outside work (Vogel et al., 2021). Leadership development includes a broad range of different activities that expand both an individual's capacity and the collective's capacity to engage effectively in leadership roles and processes.

Film can be used for leadership development when you learn with film to develop your capacity to engage in various leadership interactions. You can use film to develop your knowledge, skills, and abilities as well as your leader identity and views on leadership. Using film for leadership development can be considered a form of self-directed development. Thus, individuals take

charge of their own development, pick their own learning materials (here, TV series on the Kardashians), and organize their activities during their own time with no formal control. While formal development and learning activities are often “done to” individuals, self-directed activities are often done “by” them. Self-directed learning is increasingly considered a cost-effective way that potentially results in a competitive edge and increases an organization’s leadership capacity as a whole (Reichard & Johnson, 2011). Self-directed leadership development includes attending seminars, listening to podcasts, reading books, and watching film, TV series, and even reality TV. Self-directed activities are arranged by individuals who carry them out on their own time, toward their own goals and interests, and with learning materials of their choice to improve their skills, knowledge, and self-views.

When referring to films or series of personal taste, such as the Kardashians, these self-directed activities may constitute more inclusive resources for identity work, as leadership development has received criticism for being based on established masculine leader models that are not appropriate for women (Ely et al., 2011). Leader models that are introduced in university teaching and in organizational development initiatives are not suitable for everyone and tend to promote a traditional masculine ideal and are oblivious to challenges that women, non-binary individuals, people of color, non-heterosexual people, and many other individuals face (Biehl & Schönfeld, 2023). This book explores these shortcomings and discusses material that addresses many gender issues.

Learning with film for leadership in this book and the entire book series adds to the mainstream of leadership development activities. These activities commonly have a “cognitive bias” and focus on the cognitive or behavioral dimension, disregarding the affective dimension and emotions (Vogel et al., 2021, p. 15). This is a shortcoming because leadership is not a purely rational activity but rather a relational interaction, a process that is co-created in-between people (Ladkin, 2023). Leadership involves not only the minds of leaders and followers (cognitive dimension) but also their “hearts,” that is, their sensual perception, affects, and the resulting emotions that may be activated. Through our sensual perception, we acquire knowledge that is also referred to as “aesthetic knowing” (Biehl-Missal, 2015) and constitutes a form of knowledge that is embodied and tacit, a knowledge that individuals are able to put into practice but are unable to express in words or to describe in formalized terms (Hansen et al., 2007). In this view, the interplay of sensual perception, thinking, and reflection makes the basis of good leadership practice. These issues need to be developed with adequate methods.

Scholars in the paradigmatically plural field of leadership development have advocated working with affect and emotions and have proposed alternative styles of leadership development, which adopt more reflective and experiential approaches. While not all of these approaches converge, they address affective, relational, and embodied components of leadership that have long been disregarded and undervalued in leadership development and in management and organization studies in general. Some approaches came to harness the experiential potential of arts and culture (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). This includes working with popular culture and film that provide aesthetic experiences that address our intellect, senses, and emotions and that can train us to better understand and influence what is going on between people and in leadership interactions (Biehl & Satama, 2023). In this sense, learning with film starts with you and bridges individual leader development and more collective approaches to leadership development, encouraging you to take on responsibility and make a difference with regard to gendered issues in leadership.

## LEARNING WITH FILM

Learning with film for leadership development does not happen automatically. It is not enough to find a comfy position on the sofa or elsewhere and to turn on your device. Rather, you need to know how to learn and what steps can be followed to generate insights from the film experience.

In the journal *Management Learning* (Biehl, 2023), I have presented a three-step framework of learning with film, which is summarized in [Table 1](#). The framework is based on experiential learning, which processes experiences and transforms insights, knowledge, and skills into initiating further action at work and in life. In this vein, you are not only learning “from” film but “with” film by working with the experiences that a film or a TV series generates. Learning with film benefits from a particular focus on the film *experience*, not only from a focus on the *content* or *story* of the film that is intellectually followed. Watching a film is not passive – even if it may appear to be – but requires an active viewer who experiences the images, editing, camera movements and actors’ body positions, postures and gestures, sound, and colors. Arranging and creating these elements is an art in itself. Film professionals are highly specialized, as evidenced by Oscar categories such as “editing,” “sound editing,” and “cinematography.”