

WHAT CAN CORPORATE LEADERS LEARN FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING?

*Q&A with the author of
The President's Book of Secrets*

The president of the United States receives a regular intelligence briefing, usually daily, that is meant to “provide accurate, timely, and objective information” and to allow them to make decisions that are only made by the president of the United States. This briefing consists of the most sensitive and pertinent intelligence gathered from across the world and is customized based on the preferences of the sitting president. The decisions resulting from these reports impact millions of people around the world. At face value, the similarities between these intelligence reports and those used by corporate leaders are few. However, executives in the private sector can learn a great deal from how the president uses their daily briefing.

In writing [The President's Book of Secrets](#) (2017), David Priess met with every living president and vice president to dive into the relationship presidents have with their daily intelligence briefing. In one summary of the book, it is noted that “presidents have spent anywhere from a few moments (Richard Nixon) to a healthy part of their day (George W. Bush) consumed by its contents; some (Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush) consider it far and away the most important document they saw on a regular basis while commander in chief.”

In today's corporate climate, leaders have similar informational challenges. There is an almost overwhelming amount of information available on a broad range of topics, many of which are critical to running a multinational corporation. However, like leaders of countries, most executives only have a few minutes each day to digest this information before being pulled in another direction. Leaders need curated information in a format that is customized to provide the appropriate context to maximize the likelihood of successful outcomes.

FleishmanHillard New York team members Colin Hart (senior vice president & partner) and Adele Petagna (senior account executive) spoke with Priess and discussed the importance of regular intelligence briefs, his experience interviewing some of the top global leaders of the world, and how corporate leaders must utilize intelligence to inform their business decisions.



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Q *Your book explores the relationship each president had with their daily intelligence briefing. What can corporate leaders learn from U.S. presidents when it comes to how they used their daily briefings?*

The main lesson involves the value of walling off regular time to receive the most objective and timely information possible. Corporate executives and the president of the United States alike have extremely demanding schedules — and, too often, competing commitments lead intelligence briefings or other such information sessions being jettisoned. While good intelligence doesn't guarantee positive outcomes, bad or insufficient information all but ensures suboptimal results.

Q *Concern about geopolitics has increasingly made its way into boardroom discussions. Based on your research for *The President's Book of Secrets*, what would you recommend to executives to better guide their daily decision-making?*

The past few years have given us far too many examples of distant world events causing significant harm to corporate interests. Responsible leaders create and maintain avenues for receiving analysis of geopolitical dynamics, allowing them to anticipate such challenges to their operations as well as to identify opportunities within shifting landscapes. Across the decades, U.S. presidents and their most senior aides have found that getting good information really is about both of those: avoiding threats, yes, but also understanding changes and taking advantage of them.

Q *In your research, you also spoke to many of the individuals who prepared and presented the daily briefings to the president. Were there any key learnings from your conversations about how to tailor a briefing for a prominent decision-maker?*

The question itself contains part of the answer: The first step is simply recognizing the need to tailor the briefing! Not all people receive information the same way, so communicators to busy executives must remember to adjust the format and style of the presentation to the actual person they are briefing. This makes it far more likely that important messages will be understood clearly and made actionable. Ideally, leaders who receive briefings self-reflect and share their insights on how they absorb information most effectively. On top of that, briefers can research leaders' backgrounds and experiences to assess their familiarity with unusual topics, anticipate interaction style, and even develop useful analogies to use when explaining various items.

Q *As you think about the difference between intelligence available to business leaders and the leaders of governments, what types of information would you consider invaluable that may often be overlooked or taken for granted?*

Intelligence briefings for business leaders may seem quite different from those for government leaders because the latter receive classified information. The consequences of this difference, however, are overstated. Businesses also have access to confidential information, whether internal data and metrics or proprietary, customized analysis. Whether some intelligence product completely relies on widely available information (as even many government briefings do) or incorporates secrets, the product almost always has a firm foundation in open-source information. What adds value for the executive receiving it typically is insightful analysis: what the information means, and the opportunities the situation presents.



Priess identifies the parallel between world leaders and top business executives in the sense that both have extremely demanding schedules; however, comprehensive and crucial intelligence briefings are important for both leaders to succeed. While most of us will never come close to the morning briefing that guides the decisions of the “most powerful person in the world,” communications leaders can provide executives with daily intelligence that will better inform their decisions and their contributions to their organization’s goals and objectives. FleishmanHillard frequently produces and curates these types of reports for clients and strongly encourages companies to implement daily intelligence into the schedules of their executives.

It Is More Crucial Than Ever Before To Revisit Your Organization’s Daily Insight Reports

The communications landscape is more challenging than ever. Ask one of the many companies that have found themselves at the center of criticism over social issues — from all sides of the situation. It is important for decision-makers to not only know what the news media is saying about their organization and their competitors, but it is equally important to understand how the perceptions of an organization’s key stakeholders are shifting on any given topic or issue.

Many corporations who have found themselves in hot water could have better navigated these criticisms by better understanding their stakeholders. The increased polarization of society and the move from a daily to a constant news cycle has only increased the demand for nimble leaders.

The right intelligence is only part of the equation. However, as Priess says, it is certainly a great starting point.

How To Get the Right Intelligence in the Hands of Your Executives

Corporate intelligence and briefing reports can take different forms, and the content should be tailored based on the specific company and the needs of its leaders. As a starting place, there is a series of questions that are important to ask. These include:

- What type of reports are company leaders currently receiving?
- Are these reports delivered monthly, weekly or daily? Are different types of reports delivered at different intervals?
- How do executives receive crisis flags and updates?
- Do the reports include news media, social media and other important company information?
- Does the company have important information and/or key performance indicators that aren’t being sent to executives?
- Are there resources communications teams wish executives had but don’t know how to get?
- Is the communications team responsible for compiling these reports or is it another team?
- Are your leaders receiving relevant updates regarding macro-risk and industry trends that can inform and empower their decision-making?
- If company leaders are not receiving daily briefings, what news and information sources are they relying on?

FleishmanHillard uses the answers to these questions and others to create bespoke intelligence reports for its clients and guide them through the most difficult of situations. The reports created come in various formats and frequencies and are tailored specifically for each client or situation.

Whether organizations are currently amidst pressure over a societal issue, in a crisis, or are simply interested in staying ahead of competitors and criticism, FleishmanHillard counselors are available to discuss custom reports, ongoing intelligence gathering, and crisis and issues management counsel.

Please reach out to fhny.crisis@fleishman.com for more information.

