
Business Life

JUDGMENT CALL

Four professionals offer expert advice

To what extent should CEOs engage with the media?

THE PROBLEM

Last week, two executives speaking at an event on leadership at London Business School disagreed on how business leaders should engage with public debates. Ian Davis, the former head of consultants McKinsey, argued that many do not speak up because of the media's unrelenting cynicism towards business. But Jeff Immelt, chief executive of General Electric, said that in spite of this, leaders needed to communicate with the outside world as part of being good corporate citizens. Who is right? Should business leaders be vocal in pressing their case via the airwaves and newsprint or should they avoid the potentially negative exposure altogether?

THE ADVICE



THE CONSULTANT Tom Maddocks

It is not surprising that many chief executives and chairmen prefer to avoid media scrutiny. In my work coaching corporate spokespeople, senior executives sometimes tell me that putting their heads above the parapet will mean they have to answer for the sins of an entire industry – big banks or big oil, for instance. The result is that when there is a legitimate subject for debate, the company perspective usually goes unheard, while the hubbub of rent-a-quote consumer critics grows increasingly shrill.

The answer to this conundrum? The CEO cannot do everything, so work hard to find and train the individuals one or two levels down, part of whose role should be to take more media opportunities – even when there are tough issues – and patiently put the organisation's view across. They must not pretend their company always gets everything right, but come over as a sympathetic and reasonable presence to journalists and across the airwaves. Companies will then have the chance of building the public and political support on which they ultimately rely.

The writer is founder and course director of Media Training Associates