



How to Identify and Avoid the Glass Cliff as a Female Executive

If you've spent any time in the corporate world, you may be aware of the glass ceiling. Despite the growing national conversation about equality, women in business still struggle to advance beyond a certain point within their careers. But equally insidious is the glass cliff phenomenon, in which women and minorities get promoted quickly during times of crisis — only to see their career trajectories stagnate once again when that moment has passed.¹

Why the glass cliff exists

When a company is doing well, its board of directors is unlikely to shake things up. They're content to hire leaders who are similar to one another because they want to continue their success. But this tendency to hire people who fit a certain profile prevents talented professionals from different backgrounds from accessing those opportunities.

However, when the company is in crisis, its board wants to appoint leaders who can effectively turn the ship around. Whoever led the organization up to this point has failed in some way, so the decision-makers are open to new ideas and to people who might otherwise fall outside of their hiring scope.

Key takeaways



When women are promoted to lead a company during a crisis, then see their career stagnate, they have reached the "glass cliff".



Women have been proven to lead well during times of crisis.



A crisis situation can be an ideal opportunity when a company's culture is diverse.



However, once the crisis is averted, those groups aren't necessarily poised for continued opportunities. Many people prefer male leaders — and qualities typically associated with men, such as decisiveness — when everything is going well at a company.² But they perceive more traditionally feminine traits, including an encouraging attitude and strong communication skills, as valuable during periods of difficulty. Therefore, decision-makers may revert to the previous hiring and promotion patterns once the company's problems have been righted, causing the marginalized groups' opportunities to shrink again.

Another perspective is that when men represent the majority of decision-makers, they may be influenced by in-group biases. To protect the careers of those who are similar to them, they're more likely to choose women to lead struggling companies, sparing other men the professional fallout of failure.³

A person who takes over as a leader during a time of crisis faces higher obstacles to success. From day one, their job is not only to lead but to solve significant problems and ensure the company's safety. The chances of failure are greater than if they had come in during a time of security and prosperity — and a failed leadership tenure won't enhance their future prospects.

How to avoid falling off the cliff

The glass cliff is a harsh and unfortunate reality, but it doesn't have to stay that way. Nor does it mean you should turn down opportunities solely because a company is struggling. The key to preventing yourself from falling off that cliff is to take a holistic view of the position.

Once you've established the basics of an opportunity, such as core responsibilities and compensation, ask questions about the company's culture. Speak with previous leaders about their experiences. Did they feel supported in the role? Were they adequately prepared for the challenges they faced and did they find the board of directors appropriately communicative?

Find out what type of support structures are in place. Knowing that there are designated mentors who can help you navigate tough decisions shows that the company wants you to succeed and will provide the resources to help you do so.⁴

It's also a good idea to take a look at the make-up of the company. An executive team that's comprised of only men may indicate hiring biases that could prevent you from progressing or could lead you to feel alienated.⁵ However, if the company has a proven history of hiring diverse talent across all levels and departments, you may find a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Most importantly, make connections from day one. Seek out partners who can not only advise you on difficult decisions but who will also vouch for your leadership abilities when they're called into question. Having a network of people who can offer you constructive criticism and who know your worth will help you strive forward even when it seems that the glass cliff is looming ever closer.

Forge a new path

As long as the glass cliff exists, women and minorities may struggle to win — and keep — top leadership positions. But by refusing to be diminished by such challenges, you can change the way people perceive you and in turn forge new paths for those who come after you.

Steps to consider

- Evaluate promotion opportunities through the lens of their long-term career impacts.
- Choose positions that offer mentorship and support structures.
- Find out who's who at all levels of the company to determine whether it's an inclusive, dynamic environment.

The support you need

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¹ Bianca Barratt, "We Need to be Careful When Talking About the Glass Cliff," November 20, 2018,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/biancabarratt/2018/11/20/we-need-to-be-careful-when-talking-about-the-glass-cliff/#5860febace6f>

² Leah Eichler, "4 Reasons Why Many Prefer a Male Boss, October 29, 2014," <https://www.inc.com/leah-eichler/4-reasons-why-many-prefer-a-male-boss.html>

³ Florida State University, "Research finds troubling disadvantages, including bias, against women in business," July 17, 2018,

<https://phys.org/news/2018-07-disadvantages-bias-women-business.html>

⁴ Key4Women, "Finding the Right Mentor in the Workplace," September 2018,

<https://www.key.com/businesses-institutions/business-expertise/articles/finding-the-right-mentor.jsp>

⁵ Key4Women, "Create Real Change by Confronting Unconscious Bias," August 2018,

<https://www.key.com/businesses-institutions/business-expertise/articles/unconscious-bias.jsp>

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