Getting Past Gender Bias to the Real Leadership Problem

Written by Debborah Himsel, Reviewed 2026

Three prominent women leaders were recently ousted from their positions, and a number of bloggers as well as traditional media charged they were victims of glass cliffs and gender bias. Not only do these charges seem misguided but they take attention away from a critical leadership problem – bad bosses.

When Jill Abramson of the New York Times, Natalie Nougayrède, of the French newspaper, Le Monde and Anne Baldassari, the head of the Picasso museum in France were dismissed in the same week, many people immediately assumed the worst. The consensus in most blogs and in traditional media stories, however, was that each of these women was dismissed as a result of a populist revolt rather than anti-female management. While all three women possessed many strengths, they also had serious managerial flaws. It was reported that Abramson comes across as short tempered, polarizing and mercurial. The stories about Nougayrède suggest she was "Putin-like" and those about Baldassari characterize her as paranoid and authoritarian.

According to many news reports, it appears as if all three were ousted because employees revolted and said enough is enough. In the case of Baldassari, a management review recommended her dismissal because of "profound suffering in the workplace".

While many women leaders aren't harsh taskmasters, a significant percentage seem to opt for this management style because of the double-bind dilemma: women leaders are caught between presenting a tough front and risk being criticized as being a bitch or adopting an empathic, feminine stance and risk being criticized for being too soft. I would theorize that one or perhaps all of the three top leaders dismissed chose a management style in reaction to the double-bind dilemma. They were placed in difficult positions because of their gender and mistakenly chose a tough leadership style for fear of being criticized as "soft"; this word carries more negative connotations for women leaders than being seen as a bitch.

As tempting as it is to talk about double standards for women leaders, this seems to be a case of justice being served. No matter how these women developed their leadership styles,I wanted to stand-up and cheer that these leaders were held accountable for their bad boss behavior. There are still too many ineffective senior leaders of both genders getting away with creating toxic workplaces. Too often, organizations fail to effectively monitor their top leaders or are slow to act even when they are aware of their shortcomings. Why? Three reasons:

- Rationalizations that these leaders are still achieving their results or the complaints aren't yet bad enough to require action.

- Fears that dismissing a high profile leader will be more trouble than it's worth—negative media reaction, lawsuits and the labor required to find a replacement if a successor isn't ready or chosen.

- Unwillingness to pull the trigger, despite being aware that a leader has been exhibiting dysfunctional behaviors.

This last point is particularly disturbing. Allegedly, Jill Abramson was receiving executive coaching to overcome her managerial flaws but my guess is that it was too little too late. Changing years of ingrained behaviors doesn't happen overnight.

Organizations possess effective tools that allow them to identify dysfunctional leadership behaviors and help these leaders to work at correcting them. For example, Robert Hogan, a well-known psychologist, created an assessment tool that identified leadership derailers – personality traits that emerge under stress when we lose our ability to keep ourselves in check. In fact, one of these derailers is called excitable or mercurial – the exact words used to describe Abramson. When some organizations consider these tools to be "psycho-babble"—a not uncommon reaction—they fail to intervene and provide a leader with the coaching and other help necessary to manage counterproductive behaviors.

But even if gender was indirectly responsible for the problems these women encountered, there is a larger leadership issue that must be addressed. When I was at Avon, I worked for (and subsequently wrote a book about) former CEO, Andrea Jung. During the first half of her tenure, she was arguably the best CEO extant, man or woman. Yet she stayed too long and her leadership style, so effective for a sustained period, began to cause problems, including ratcheting up tensions between veteran Avon managers and relative newcomers. It was time for her to go, but the board, without a successor in the wings, was slow to act for all three of the reasons listed previously.

We no longer have the luxury of allowing struggling CEO's and other top leaders to stay in place. The margin for error is razor-thin in a hyper-competitive global world, and whether a critical player is hurting morale or performance (or both), he or she has to get help or go. Getting sidetracked on gender when it's not the main reason for the dismissal—or even when it's a secondary issue—is a mistake. Organizations and their boards must become more vigilant and more willing to take action sooner than in the past, recognizing that a bad boss is a bad boss, regardless of gender.

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