The Imaginary Precipice

Written by Debborah Himsel

Reviewed 2026

Are women leaders being pushed and pulled toward an organizational glass cliff, toward jobs that no man in his right mind would take but women grab out of naivete or desperation?

UK researchers coined this term to explain their findings that organizations facing a dire crisis or turn around situation were more likely to select a potentially expendable woman than a man to try and fix things. They also suggested that in many cases, this sacrificial female would be pushed aside for a male if things went south or when things stabilized.

In the wake of General Motors' problems with their faulty ignition switches and CEO Mary Barra's well-publicized attempts to deal with these problems (including testifying at Congressional hearings), this glass cliff term has caught on once again. It has raised the question of whether women leaders such as Barra are being set-up as scapegoats or placed in no win situations by male leaders.

Let's examine two hypotheses currently circulating that attempt to verify the existence of a glass cliff.

First, some pundits have theorized that women are more likely than men to say yes to taking on a crisis leadership position because they lack the powerful network that can inform them about the underlying problems with the position or within the organization. For instance, no one told Mary Barra that the faulty ignition switch crisis would erupt on the next CEO's watch.

I find this hypothesis unlikely. Even though women may have different networking skills than men, their networks are no less strong than those of men and they pay more attention to the buzz that builds on them. Perhaps more to the point, women leaders often relish the challenge of crisis or turnaround situations—they don't naively venture out onto the glass cliff but go willingly. When Andrea Jung took over Avon in 1999, she did so with her eyes open, accepting the CEO role from a man amid a tumbling stock price, take over rumors and low employee morale. Ms. Jung, at 40 years of age, certainly did not say to herself, "I don't have any CEO experience, and I lack the network necessary to clue me in to what's really going on here ." Instead, she grabbed the opportunity and ran with it, recognizing it was a great opportunity to prove herself.

The second glass cliff hypothesis is: Boards or decision makers want a candidate to clean up a mess who has more stereotypically female skills such as inclusion, empathy or engagement. I don't buy this hypothesis either, though certainly on occasion women CEOs are hired because the previous male leader was arrogant and exclusionary and the company seeks a more empathetic and inspirational replacement for morale purposes.

Anne Mulchahy, former CEO of Xerox, may have lacked some of the hard skills of Finance, but she possessed inclusive skills to turn around the long entrenched corporate culture.

In most instances, however, organizations focus less on gender and more on finding the right leader at the right time. Some messes may require empathetic, consensus builders, but others may need financial or analytical types who are strong-willed and directive. Boards are under great pressure to find effective leaders, not to find ones who can make everyone feel good in the wake of a disaster. There's too much at stake for them to choose anyone except the ideal candidate.

Marissa Mayer at Yahoo and Ms. Barra were chosen for their positions predominately because of their customer centricity. At Avon, Andrea Jung's marketing brilliance and charismatic personality were exactly what the organization needed to turn the company around. No one saw these women as temporary maternal caretakers or as easy and somewhat desperate hires.

What bothers me most about all the glass cliff talk is that it muddies the CEO selection waters. We become sidetracked on conspiracies and on reviving the gender wars rather than tackling a complex subject. I know that gender bias still exists in many companies, but the Mary Barra situation isn't an example of bias. She was clearly being groomed for the role. What we should be talking about it how the best talent decisions are made when the criteria for what's needed are clear—when honesty and transparency govern the selection process. If boards are at fault, it is in their closed-door deliberations that fail to solicit a sufficient diversity of opinion. They may be blamed, too, for lacking precision and perspective in creating an optimal job profile and evaluating the candidates—they don't always take into account what the organization's needs are at a specific moment in its history. Who's the right leader at the right time?

I'm all for calling a glass cliff a glass cliff when boards conspire to hurl women from them, but what's taking place today is often a case of bad selection and succession decisions than bad intent.