Women at the Top: The Risks of Leading from a Glass Cliff

When you hear that a woman has been appointed to a leadership position, do you cheer or do you get a queasy feeling in your stomach because a bunch of questions pop into your head: How likely is it that anyone can succeed in this particular job? If she fails, how visible will failure be? If adverse events occur under her leadership, will they be construed as confirming intrinsic female incompetence? Have she or her colleagues internalized a negative stereotype of a woman leader? How much support is in place as she takes on leadership?

Cultural Bias and Leadership Opportunities

Although being “willing to take risks” is a cultural assumption more strongly associated with men than women, in order to be appointed to top leadership positions, such as department chair or college dean, women often need to accept more risk of failure than their male counterparts. According to recent reports, gender bias stemming from cultural stereotypes constrains the types of top leadership opportunities afforded to women and can negatively influence their experience in leadership roles. Cultural stereotypes depict women as communal (e.g., cooperative, emotional, warm) and lacking in the agentic male-typed traits (e.g., independent, logical, risk taker) associated with being a leader. Studies show that assumptions that women lack agency increase the likelihood that they will be selected for leadership positions in situations with a preexisting crisis, a lack of resources, and a high chance of visible failure.

Ryan and Haslam introduced the term “glass cliff” to differentiate the precarious “risky” leadership positions that are more often offered to women, as opposed to the advantageous and career-advancing leadership opportunities that are more often offered to men—a phenomenon termed “glass escalator.” One perspective suggests that women are selected for high-risk leadership because they are more likely than men to have a highly effective transformational leadership style (i.e., inspirational, cooperative) and the traits (e.g., interpersonal skills) thought necessary to successfully negotiate a crisis (i.e., “think crisis—think female,” see reference 7).

However, there is an opposite perspective, which is that women are less valuable leaders—that is, they are more expendable as leaders than men. This could drive the selection of women for positions that offer no career-advancing benefit to the leader—positions where crisis management is needed, but where there is no anticipated recovery. Women may take these unfavorable positions because they receive fewer opportunities for leadership. Thus, their selection and willingness to accept the position can occur despite recognition that such positions are high risk and highly stressful.

The Hidden Peril of High-Risk Leadership Assignments

Traditionally for men, each leadership position serves as a stepping stone for the next level of leadership (e.g., division head to chair to
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"Attending the ASCB meeting is coming home to an incredible supportive community truly interested in the advancement of science and scientists."
— Sara Weisberg, BioBus

"ASCB is a great medium for bringing academic and industry partners together and provides a stimulating forum for the exchange of cutting-edge ideas from biotechnology and science."
— Lynne Chang, Nikon Instruments Inc.
By comparison, high-risk leadership appointments may have adverse effects on women’s careers. Glass cliff leadership opportunities arise under crisis conditions, which make the leader and situation more visible and susceptible to scrutiny. The preexisting problems underlying such situations may have a limited chance of being resolved regardless of the quality of the selected leader, this makes leaders culpable for persisting or worsening circumstances that resist effective intervention.

Despite evidence that women are highly effective leaders, gender stereotypes lead to assumptions that women are less competent leaders than men. Placing women in precarious leadership positions where failure is likely usually functions to confirm this assumption, as women’s intrinsic lack of ability to lead is blamed rather than the irresolvable circumstances. Compounding this, taking a leadership position in a male-typed domain creates a condition that can trigger “stereotype threat” for women—a widely described phenomenon where negative stereotypes about performance are internalized and can lead to underperformance.

What Can Be Done

Multilevel interventions that target individual, departmental, and institutional practices are necessary to prepare women for leadership and to combat gender bias in appointing and sustaining them as top leaders. These strategies contrast with those based on the assumption that bias can be reduced via stereotype suppression or by taking a “gender blind” perspective—approaches actually shown to heighten the impact of stereotypes on judgment.

The Executive Leadership in Academic Medicine program and other recent interventions that target causal factors for women’s underrepresentation in science and medicine (e.g., see reference 10) provide a framework for strategies to address leadership issues.

Efforts are particularly needed for recognizing and mitigating the tendency to over-select women for high-risk, precarious leadership positions. Moreover, when leaders are selected for such positions, efforts should be made to allocate appropriate resources to rebuild the struggling department, program, or institution being led.

Support from other top leaders is also important for helping both women and men succeed in top leadership, particularly in precarious situations where resources and support may be lacking.

In summary, there are outstanding women who are primed to be outstanding leaders.
However, leadership opportunities can set women up for career setbacks in several ways: Women may be offered glass cliff leadership roles with a high chance of visible failure; adverse events occurring under a woman’s leadership may be construed to confirm intrinsic incompetence; and women themselves may be vulnerable to the crippling effects of stereotype threat. The selection process for institutional leaders, preparation of women for leadership, and support for women who are in leadership continue to require attention.

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References


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Call for Teaching Mentors, Mentees

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