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Leaders Can Avoid The Glass

and minorities in leadership roles during a crisis—



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BY SAVA BERHANÉ

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If things don't improve, poor firm performance justifies companies pushing out so-called "risky" hires. Cook and Glass call this process the "savior effect" since, in the majority of cases, companies replace women and minorities with white men. In fact, women succeeded other women or minority CEOs in **only four of the 608 transitions over a 15-year period**, according to the researchers.

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This tells us that not only do women and minorities have a disproportionately harder time moving up the talent pipeline in the first place, they also get riskier leadership opportunities when they get there. So how do you avoid the glass cliff in an otherwise great promotion offer? By staying vigilant, even when you've reached the top. Here's how.

1. KNOW WHY YOU ARE BEING CHOSEN

Self-awareness can go a long way before and after you say yes. Ask yourself why you, and not someone else, are being picked for this promotion.

Every successful leader needs to know not just their own strengths and weaknesses, but also how others perceive them. Yes, you're hardworking, intelligent, and charismatic, but organizations promote people for more reasons than just those. Furthermore, research shows that **we are poor self-evaluators**: The average correlation between our sense of self at work and objective assessments is pretty low. We're likely to both overrate and underrate key skills.

Women and minorities have been **found to underrate** their performance as leaders at higher rates than others. Yet **studies have also shown** that the most effective and successful leaders have more accurate self-perceptions than others. To understand why you're being selected for a top job, you need to reflect on your capabilities as objectively as possible.

2. KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT

Julia Pierson was the first woman **to be appointed director of the Secret Service**, in 2013, with explicit instructions to clean up the agency in the wake of a prostitution scandal. Pierson's appointment came after her predecessor's seven-year tenure, a job he kept even after revelations that two civilians had crept past multiple layers of security to crash a state dinner at the White House. Moreover, prior to Pierson's arrival, the Secret Service was known to be understaffed and underfunded—its problems may have stemmed from poor leadership, but they also came from scarce resources.

Whether or not Pierson took this into account, **the glass cliff phenomenon was clear**. The organization

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You may be thought to have qualities that make you a better leader in a crisis, like being empathic or fair, but the higher chances of failure that you're likely to face might override those. The more you know, the better you can negotiate an arrangement that doesn't leave you absorbing unmerited blame in the end.

3. KNOW WHO YOU'RE DEALING WITH

When Irene Rosenfeld was hired in 2006 as CEO of Kraft (now Mondelez), her job was to "effect company turnaround." [Reflecting in Forbes](#) three years later, Rosenfeld says her biggest achievement was "rewiring the organization."

In her first year, she "changed over half of the top levels of management," ensured that "key leaders are well-aligned on the objective of changing Kraft's trajectory," and placed "the right people in key jobs to essentially support and execute against that agenda." To do all this, Rosenfeld had to connect across all stakeholders, including [actively engaging difficult investors](#). She calls this "servant leadership," a way to "engage the hearts and minds" of followers.

The key to her success, in other words, was influence. Contrary to Rosenfeld's case, women are forced out of top jobs at higher rates than men, [according to a 2013 Strategy& report](#). Researchers in that study say one reason is because women are often recruited from outside the company—35% of women compared to 22% of men.

That makes those women more vulnerable—as external hires, they're more likely to lack the institutional knowledge needed to diagnose problems quickly. "That women CEOs are more often outsiders may be an indication that companies have not been able to cultivate enough female executives in house," one of the report's authors writes.

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What's the best way to combat this? According to [Geri Denterlien](#), the owner of a communications firm who has 30 years of experience coaching executives, women who stay at the top know how to "travel outside of the C-suite." As she explains, "Women are often hired after the organization has faced an

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And as Rosenfeld's experience makes clear, this isn't just about self-preservation. Call it "servant leadership," "retail politics," or whatever you like, but without first getting as many people in your corner as you can, you'll have a hard time getting done what you were brought in to do. What's worse for a leader than being cornered in at the top is when the ground falls out from underneath.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sava Berhané is the associate director of Bentley University's [Center for Women and Business \(CWB\)](#). She holds a BA from Mount Holyoke College and a JD from Yale Law School. [More](#)

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