



Women in executive positions: leaders or symbols?

A UNIGE study explains why women have greater access to positions of responsibility when a company faces a crisis.

The term “glass cliff” is used to describe the phenomenon whereby women reach positions of responsibility when a company is in crisis – roles that would not usually be assigned to them in more “normal” times. Several studies since 2005 have shown that when a firm or a political party is suffering a downturn, women are more likely to attain management positions or be appointed as candidates for elections. How can this be explained? Researchers at the University of Geneva (UNIGE), Switzerland, have examined the question in a series of studies published in the journal *The Leadership Quarterly*. They found that women symbolise change at the head of a company, a symbol that helps a business bolster its image. The research team also observed that during periods of crisis, qualities typically associated with men are prioritised in recruitment criteria, regardless of the individual’s gender.

When it comes to filling positions of responsibility, women bump up against a glass ceiling. However, when a company is going through a difficult managerial and financial situation, women have better access to leadership positions. Clara Kulich and Vincenzo Iacoviello, researchers in the Psychology Section in UNIGE’s Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (FPSE), looked at the reasons for this greater openness, known as the “glass cliff.” “Our initial hypothesis”, begins Kulich, “was that qualities that are thought to be ‘feminine’ – such as the ability to listen to employees and the sensitivity to others’ problems – were sought in turbulent times. But our results turned out to be different!”

So-called “masculine” skills take precedence in a crisis

The UNIGE psychologists set about analysing the role of gender and individual characteristics during the recruitment process in troubled times. They submitted four curricula vitae, two for men and two for women, to about a hundred people, 40% of whom held managerial positions. For one of the men and one of the women, skills stereotypically associated with the female gender were stressed: listening, sensitivity and emotional tact. For the other two, the CVs highlighted skills stereotypically associated with males: determination, taking responsibility and self-confidence.

“We then asked the participants in a study to select the CV they considered was appropriate for a company in crisis, together with a CV suitable for a firm that was doing well,” explains Kulich. “In 63% of cases,



Clara Kulich, senior research and teaching assistant in the FPSE psychology section.

a candidate (male or female) with masculine characteristics was chosen to run a business in turmoil, compared to 41% for a company that was producing good results.” Two other studies showed that, when selecting what kind of business a candidate with masculine characteristics should be selected for, 76% choose a company in crisis. These results may be explained as follows: in a crisis, recruiters look for someone with “masculine” skills because these are the skills deemed necessary for turning around of the company.

So, why do women find it easier to reach positions of responsibility if the skills generally seen as masculine are prioritised during a managerial upheaval?

Women: a symbol of change

One of the explanations lies in the fact that the characteristics of candidates are not so polarised during the recruitment process. An earlier study by the same team (2015, published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*) showed that when two identical CVs for a man and a woman are presented to a company in crisis – without mentioning their masculine or feminine characteristics – the women are selected in most cases. It appears from this that recruiters view women as symbols of change at the head of a company in difficulty. Women symbolise a radical and visible change at the top, the aim being to boost the firm’s image in difficult times. Under these circumstances, gender is a determining factor in the decision made by recruiters because of its impact on the position and image of the failing company.

“Our study demonstrates that it is still hard for women to overcome the glass cliff phenomenon. A man is hired for his managerial skills, whereas a woman cannot know whether she is perceived as a symbol of change (or even a scapegoat for failure in some cases) or whether it is really the perception that she is a skilled leader that has led her to a position of responsibility,” concludes Kulich.

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