

Influence in Times of Crisis: How Do Men and Women Evaluate Precarious Leadership Positions?

October 23, 2012

We've all heard of the "glass ceiling" but the recent economic crisis has illuminated another workplace phenomenon: the "glass cliff." Women seem to be overrepresented in precarious leadership positions at organizations going through crisis. Evidence is growing that more feminine leadership traits, such as being understanding and tactful, are believed to be desirable under such circumstances, causing people to make a "think crisis – think female" association.

But is it that women are always passively selected into these jobs or do they sometimes also actively seek them out? A new study published in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), suggests that it's not the precarious positions per se that attract women leaders, but perhaps the social resources that come with them.

In the study, psychological scientists Floor Rink and Janka Stoker of the University of Groningen and Michelle Ryan of the University of Groningen and the University of Exeter investigated how men and women evaluate these glass-cliff positions. The researchers speculated that, all else being equal, women wouldn't be more attracted to a precarious position, but they would be more sensitive to certain aspects of the position.

Rink and her colleagues hypothesized that, following gender norms, women would be more attentive to communal aspects of precarious leadership roles, focusing on social resources, while men would attend to aspects related to authority and hierarchy, focusing on financial resources.

In the first study, Rink and colleagues asked Dutch business students to imagine working for a large company in financial crisis. They were offered a top leadership position at the hypothetical company, where they would be in charge of resolving the crisis. All of the students read a passage containing information about the social and financial resources that came with the position. One group read that they had employee support (social resources) and financial investment from management (financial resources), a second group read that they had financial investment but no employee support, and a third group read that they had employee support but no financial investment.

Comparing across genders, women generally seemed less likely than men to evaluate any of the positions positively. Yet comparing across the three scenarios, women were particularly less likely to accept the position that lacked social resources, while men were less inclined to accept the position that lacked financial resources, confirming the researchers' hypotheses.

A second study suggests these findings may have been driven by internalized gender stereotypes about leadership. The researchers found that women viewed employee acceptance as a factor that would lead to influence, while men viewed influence as an attribute that would lead to employee acceptance.

“Since the discovery of the glass cliff, researchers and practitioners have questioned whether women are simply more likely than men to accept precarious leadership positions, thereby – albeit unintentionally – putting themselves at a disadvantage in their careers,” the researchers note. “Our findings make it clear that the glass cliff cannot be attributed to women’s failure to recognize the precariousness of glass-cliff positions.”

Taken together, the findings from the two studies suggest that societal expectations about gender and leadership play a key role in driving women’s and men’s evaluations of glass cliff positions.

The researchers argue that these findings may be useful for organizations searching for new leaders to guide them through crises. “In order to get the right person for the right job, it is probably important for organizations to recognize which aspects of a crisis they want their future leader to solve and to give him or her the appropriate means with which to do so,” says Rink.