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In Jill Abramson's Firing, Was The 'Glass Cliff' To Blame?

Written by Alison Cook, Professor of Management at the Huntsman School of Business at USU, and Christy Glass, Professor of Sociology at USU



Our research on CEOs in the Fortune 500 finds that women leaders face two significant challenges: the “glass cliff” and the “savior effect”. First, we find that women are more likely than men to be appointed CEO to struggling firms or firms in crisis. This phenomenon is termed the “glass cliff” because it suggests that when women are appointed to top positions these positions are often precarious or risky. Second, we find that when firms struggle under the leadership of women CEOs, these leaders are likely to be replaced by men. We term this phenomenon the “savior effect” because when organizations struggle under the leadership of women, decision makers often revert to more traditional leaders who are perceived to be capable of “saving” the organization. Our research finds strong and significant evidence for both the glass cliff and the savior effect for women leaders. Overall, women leaders face greater challenges and are given fewer opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities than their male counterparts.

Our research provides insight to the firing of Jill Abramson, the first woman executive editor of the NY Times, in three ways. First, Abramson was appointed in 2011 following a series of highly publicized crises at the paper, including a plagiarism scandal, widespread critiques of the paper’s coverage of foreign policy and national security under the Bush and Obama administrations, and declining competitiveness on the digital news front. Arguably her appointment is consistent with our findings regarding the glass cliff. Second, throughout her tenure as the first woman editor, Abramson faced significant challenges related to token status, including negative evaluations of her leadership, hyper scrutiny by her peers and supervisors, and intense pressures to take the paper in bold new directions. Finally, her firing appears to be a classic example of the savior effect. Shortly before her firing, an internal report was circulated at the paper that emphasized that the paper’s lack of digital competitiveness had reached a crisis point. The belief by the publisher that the paper was facing a crisis under the leadership of Abramson may have contributed to a perception that Abramson was not a capable leader. Abramson’s reputation as “difficult” and “bossy” likely only provided further justification for this perception. As a result, Abramson was fired and replaced by a man who had strong relationships in the newsroom and with the publisher, and who could “save” the paper from crisis.

Overall our research on women CEOs suggests that Abramson’s tenure and departure from the NY Times may be a result of the pressures she experienced as a result of the glass cliff and the savior effect. As our findings demonstrate, when an organization struggles under a woman’s leadership—even in the short term—women leaders are blamed and replaced. Most telling is that at an organization where the executive editor has traditionally remained in the position until retirement, the first woman in this role was fired fewer than three years into her tenure and replaced by a man, all in the name of saving the paper.

To learn more about how Cook's and Glass's research relates to Abramson's firing, [check out a recent NPR article](#) that was published on May 19.