



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Leadership Quarterly

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/leaqua

Leading at the top: Understanding women's challenges above the glass ceiling

Christy Glass^{a,1,2}, Alison Cook^{b,3}^a SSWA, Utah State University, 0730 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT 84322-0730, USA^b Jon M. Huntsman School of Business, Utah State University, 3555 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT 84322-3555, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 April 2015

Received in revised form 21 July 2015

Accepted 20 September 2015

Available online xxxx

Handling Editor: William Gardner

Keywords:

Gender

Leadership

CEOs

Glass cliffs

ABSTRACT

Women leaders contribute positively to organizations yet remain significantly underrepresented in corporate leadership positions. While the challenges women face are well-documented, less understood are the factors that shape the experience and success of women who, against significant odds, rise above the glass ceiling. This paper advances scholarship on women and leadership by analyzing the conditions under which women are promoted to top leadership positions and exploring the opportunities and challenges they face post-promotion. We draw on two data sources: comparison of the career trajectories of all women who have ever served as CEO in the Fortune 500 with a matched sample of men CEOs as well as in-depth interviews with women executives across a variety of sectors. Our analysis reveals that women are more likely than men to be promoted to high risk leadership positions and often lack the support or authority to accomplish their strategic goals. As a result, women leaders often experience shorter tenures compared to male peers. We consider the implication of our findings for theory, research and practice.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Women leaders have enormous potential to contribute positively to organizations. Recent scholarship suggests that female leaders are associated with greater innovation and profitability, broader consumer outreach and stronger records on corporate social responsibility (Dezső & Ross, 2012; Glass, Cook, & Ingersoll, 2015; Herring, 2009; Webb, 2004). Women's representation in leadership ranks also increases opportunities for women at lower ranks, thus reducing overall gender segregation within organizations (Ely, 1995; Gorman, 2005; Stainback & Kwon, 2012). Despite this evidence, women remain significantly underrepresented in corporate leadership positions.

A great deal of scholarship to date concerns the barriers that prevent women from attaining leadership positions. Sex categorization and gender stereotypes lead decision makers to view women as less capable and competent leaders, while in-group favoritism leads men to prefer other men for high level promotions and appointments, a phenomenon termed 'homosocial reproduction' (Kanter, 1977; Reskin, 2000; Ridgeway & England, 2007; Ridgeway, 1997). Aside from subtle and overt forms of bias and discrimination, women are less likely than men to have access to strong professional networks, social ties to elites, workplace support and insider information, all of which provide critical support to leaders' mobility (e.g., McGuire, 2002; Taylor, 2010).

While the challenges women face are well-documented, less understood are the factors that shape the experience and success of women who, against significant odds, rise above the glass ceiling. Recent theoretical advances have identified a process termed the

E-mail addresses: christy.glass@usu.edu (C. Glass), alison.cook@usu.edu (A. Cook).¹ Tel.: +1 435 797 1258; fax: +1 435 797 1240.² The authors contributed equally to this manuscript. For convenience they alternate author order.³ Tel.: +1 435 797 7654; fax: +1 435 797 1091.<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.09.003>

1048-9843/© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Please cite this article as: Glass, C., & Cook, A., Leading at the top: Understanding women's challenges above the glass ceiling, *The Leadership Quarterly* (2015), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.09.003>

glass cliff whereby women are more likely to be promoted in firms that are struggling or in crisis (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). Other researchers have applied insights from token theory and role incongruity theory to explore the challenges women face in male-dominated leadership positions (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). This scholarship suggests that women tend to be promoted to high-risk leadership positions and face significant constraints post-promotion.

This paper advances scholarship on women and leadership by analyzing the conditions under which women are promoted to top leadership positions and exploring the challenges they face post-promotion. Specifically, we seek to answer three related research questions: First, do female leaders experience a glass cliff in job assignments and/or promotion opportunities? Second, after promotion, do female leaders experience a lack of support and/or challenges to their leadership? Finally, do female leaders experience heightened scrutiny and/or performance pressures that limit their leadership tenure?

To answer these questions we rely on two data sources. First, we collected data on the career trajectories of all women who have served as CEO in the Fortune 500 as well as a matched sample of male CEOs. These data allow us to analyze the promotion and post-promotion trajectory of female leaders. Second, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 female and/or minority leaders across a variety of sectors, including 12 interviews with female leaders who have successfully overcome barriers to promotion and advancement. Interviews explored leaders' career trajectory and various challenges and opportunities they faced along the way.

This research builds upon and extends the literature on gender and leadership in several ways. First, our work extends experimental and quantitative analyses of the glass cliff phenomenon by analyzing the career trajectories and subjective experiences of successful female executives. Very few studies to date have approached the question of promotion context by incorporating the subjective experiences of corporate elites themselves (for exceptions see Davies-Nettley, 1998; Fitzsimmons, Callan, & Paulsen, 2014). Yet to fully understand the mechanisms that drive glass cliff processes, we must understand the perspectives and strategies of women who experience high risk promotions. While scholarship on the glass cliff has primarily focused on the firm-level characteristics of women promoted to CEO (e.g., Adams, Gupta, & Leeth, 2009; Cook & Glass, 2014; Ryan & Haslam, 2005), we expand this approach by analyzing the promotion of top women executives to positions that they considered high risk. We believe this provides more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities women experience as they achieve professional mobility.

Second, our work builds upon and extends research on gender and leadership by analyzing the career trajectories of an elite group of female leaders: CEOs in the Fortune 500. By comparing the career trajectory of every woman who has ever served as CEO in the Fortune 500 to the career trajectories of a matched sample of male CEOs, we can more precisely identify the pathways that allow women to successfully ascend to top positions.

Finally, our work advances scholarship by identifying the challenges women face post-promotion. Understanding challenges that may limit women's ability to lead successfully is critical to advancing women's representation in leadership positions because a lack of success risks reinforcing stereotypes and bias regarding women's leadership capability. By identifying challenges that limit female leaders' success we can inform policy and practice in ways that limit bias and support women's mobility and success.

Theory & research on women in leadership

Promoted off the glass cliff?

While most research on women and leadership focuses on the barriers that limit women's upward mobility in work organizations, a small but growing body of work seeks to identify the conditions under which these barriers might be overcome (e.g., Ely, 1995; Gorman, 2005; Ryan & Haslam, 2007). Recent theoretical advancements have suggested that women's promotion to leadership positions is dependent on firm performance (Ashby, Ryan, & Haslam, 2007; Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Specifically, the theory of the glass cliff predicts that women are more likely than men to be promoted in firms that are struggling, in crisis or at risk to fail (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). The current analysis extends this perspective to consider the subjective experiences of women executives in the face of specific jobs or promotions that they deem high risk. We believe exploring the glass cliff in both contexts—CEO promotions in struggling firms and promotion to leadership positions that are high-risk—allows us insight into the subjective experiences of women leaders.

Ryan and Haslam (2005, 2007) identify several mechanisms that may contribute to the phenomenon by which women leaders are promoted to risky positions. First, women may face less competition from men for these positions as highly qualified white male candidates may view these positions as too risky or otherwise undesirable (Ryan & Haslam, 2007: 558). Women, on the other hand, may be more amenable to accepting such positions out of fear that a comparable opportunity may not materialize in the future. Second, there is evidence that the requisite competencies of leaders may be context specific and vary depending on the health of the firm (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Specifically, stereotypically feminine qualities—including emotional sensitivity, strong interpersonal skills, morale building capabilities and a collaborative leadership style—may be more valued during times of crisis (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Ryan & Haslam, 2007). Such qualities may also make women candidates more attractive when decision-makers perceive a job or assignment as particularly high risk or challenging. Finally, a crisis or high-risk situation may motivate decision-makers to promote non-traditional leaders, including women, to signal to key stakeholders that the firm is headed in a bold new direction (Khurana, 2002).

A growing body of scholarship finds empirical support for this theory. For instance, experimental studies that ask study participants to match candidates with various leadership positions finds that participants are more likely to appoint female candidates to struggling organizations (Ashby et al., 2007; Haslam & Ryan, 2008). A longitudinal study of CEO transitions in the Fortune 500 over a fifteen-year period concludes that female and minority CEOs are more likely than men to be appointed to struggling firms (Cook

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10439499>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10439499>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)