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Women are naturals **in "glass cliff" roles!**

NOT all women in so-called "glass cliff" roles are doomed to failure, suggests troubleshooting and coaching specialist **Wildcat One**.

The term was coined by academics at the University of Exeter, who found women were more likely to be given top jobs in troubled companies so they could take the blame when the businesses failed.

Wildcat One director Pat Tomlin has made a career out of tackling business problems and coaching top executives, and believes women have natural skills to bring to distress situations.

"Men are great at the strong line, but can often miss the cues which would have enabled a more co-operative approach and, in the longer term, produced a better result," she says.

"One of the things that women seem to be able to do perhaps more instinctively than men is to go out there and listen – not just to what managers are saying, but to all levels of the organisation – to find out what works, what doesn't and what needs to change. There are times, particularly when you're dealing with difficult change, when you need to provide both support and direction, as well as taking those tough decisions – and women are generally excellent at recognising when that dual approach is likely to be more effective than just laying down the law."

Barbara Cassani, who made a £9.5m fortune when her low-cost airline Go was sold to easyJet for £374m – four years after a management buy-out from BA for £25m – believed talking to people, personal accessibility and visible leadership were secrets of her success. "This isn't to say that men can't do it" Tomlin explains, "Adam Crozier, the Royal Mail chief executive, is a good example and has also acknowledged the critical role that listening and talking to staff and stakeholders has played in the group's turnaround."

The glass cliff research, by psychologists Dr Michelle Ryan and Professor Alex Haslam, suggests male managers turn to their female colleagues in a time of crisis, believing the perceived feminine traits of sympathy, understanding and intuition will help turn around an unsuccessful company.

But the "golden opportunity" often turns in to a poisoned chalice when women leaders are left to take the blame for business disasters they had little chance of preventing. Either way the predominantly male board are "right" – vindicated for their "excellent judgement" when the woman executive achieves the required results, or shrugging their collective shoulders when she fails – endorsing the self-fulfilling prophesy that women can't manage at top level.

The theory is based on comparing the performance of FTSE 100 companies in 2003 with their appointment history. The 19 that had promoted women to the board had all been underperforming for at least five months. In contrast, men were recruited to executive positions in stable or improving companies.

Examples include Kate Swann, who was appointed chief executive of troubled retailer WH Smith at a time of upheaval and has been consistently criticised for her performance. And despite her previous track record in buying, building and turning businesses around, Dame Marjorie Scardino, the chief executive of publishing group Pearson, has been pilloried for her stewardship of the underperforming business.

"Because there tend to be so few women directors and chief executives they're pretty visible – which can have both advantages and disadvantages," Tomlin says. "The disadvantages are typified in this glass cliff idea – because there isn't a critical mass of women in top jobs, it's more noticeable when businesses run by women don't perform. However, there can be advantages too – Mary Dickinson, managing director of First Group's ScotRail franchise, is working hard to turn around a very traditional, male orientated business and seems very adroit at promoting her ambitions for the business through high visibility. She too has made a priority of communications with customers and staff alike".

Tomlin's advice to senior women – and men – in change management or turn around situations involves regular and credible communication. "Sometimes you just don't have the time to fully involve staff to "buy in" and contribute to the planning and implementation process as much as you'd like, because quick and radical surgery is required – however, where ever possible, that should be the game plan".

"Giving clear direction is imperative, so you must have a comprehensive communications plan for staff and stakeholders explaining what, why and when it's happening," she adds.

"Creating a plan that delivers involves identifying the root of the problem – not just the symptoms. Talk to people to understand how things really work – or don't – and develop key milestones and indices for success that will help you gauge how the changes are working. Throughout this process, it's crucial to manage resistance constructively – identify where it's coming from and improve support and communication in those areas rather than letting it fester. Last but not least, it will pay dividends if you openly recognise those who take the risk and make the early leap of faith – because others will be inspired to follow on behind."

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Although many leadership credentials are non-gender specific, such as business acumen and knowledge of good governance, Tomlin admits women generally have to work harder to convince predominantly male boards that they're cut out for top jobs. However she suggests there can be differences in the motivation between men and women for shouldering such challenges. A woman's motivation for shattering the glass ceiling and accepting the perilous "glass cliff" challenge is often to "make a difference" rather than the competitive pursuit of more money, status and a bigger car.

"There has been some interesting studies in the States and I think there are similar trends emerging in the UK, that a number of women who reach top jobs then choose to walk away from it and all it entails – many go on to establish their own businesses on their own terms.

Tomlin believes employers looking to embrace the skills and abilities that women have to offer may have to work harder in future to encourage women into senior management roles and support them when they get there. This will become imperative as changing demographics shrink the traditional labour pool – by 2010, only 20% of the UK's population will be white, male, able-bodied and under 45 (Opportunity Now 2003). At the same time, women's economy activity rate is rising rapidly, and by 2010 more women are predicted to enter the job market than men. This dynamic is likely to radically alter the makeup of the current workforce, where around 8% of women in employment are managers, compared to 18% of men (Institute of Employment Studies).

Meantime, Tomlin admits ambitious career women who are intent on breaking into the boardroom still have their work cut out.

One of my clients who got to a senior role compared it to playing a game where no-one's bothered to explain the rules and there's an assumption that you just know how to play," she says. "You're expected to know what to do, although no-one's specifically told you, which can make you feel a bit isolated and the odd one out. Maybe that's a contributory factor in why some walk away from top jobs. For the ones that pursue more conventional careers, half of the trick is knowing which of the rules and behaviours are actually important – and how much of the game you really have to play."