

'Glass cliff' plunge not inevitable for women

Females have the skills to tackle turnarounds

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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 turnarounds 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."

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.

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 positions in more stable companies.

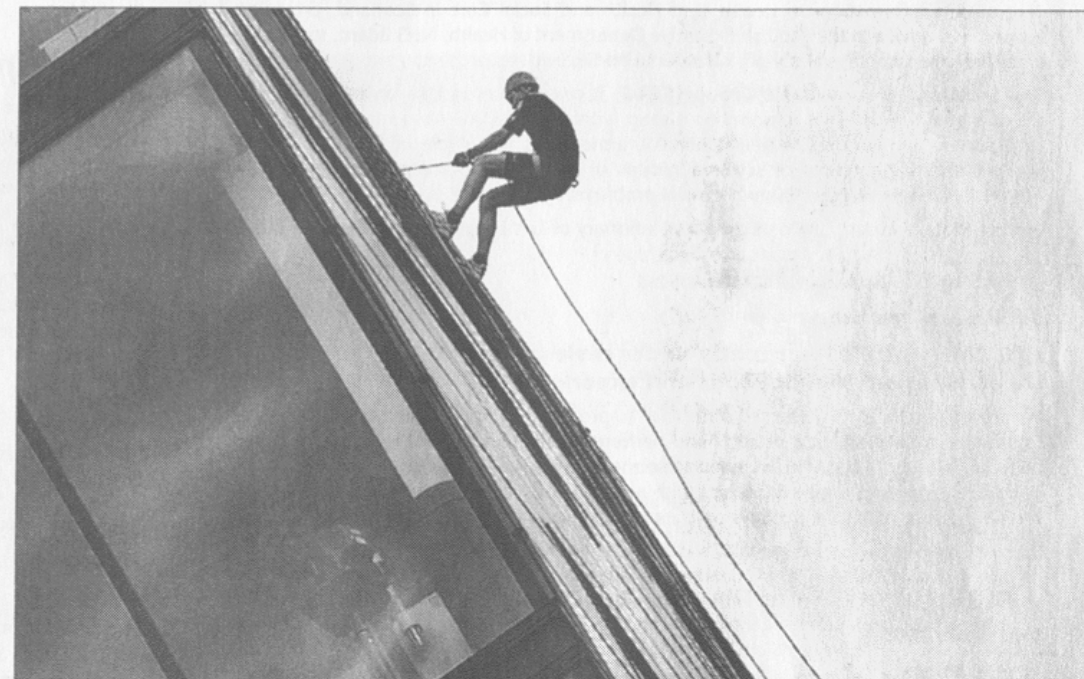
Tomlin's advice to senior women – and men – in change management situations involves regular and credible communication and encouraging staff to "buy in" by getting them to contribute to the planning and implementation process at all levels.

"Identify the root of the problem – not just the symptoms," she adds. "Talk to people to understand how things really work – or don't – and develop key milestones and indices for success. Manage resistance constructively – don't let it fester – and openly recognise

those who take the risk and make the early leap of faith – others will follow."

Tomlin suggests a woman's motivation for shattering the glass ceiling is often to "make a difference" rather than the pure pursuit of status, power or money. But when they get there, the perils of the glass cliff may be the least of their worries.

"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 and how to behave, although no-one's specifically told you. Half of the trick is knowing which of the rules and behaviours are actually important – and how much you really have to play by them."



Don't look down: Women may be better equipped for distress situations Photograph: Cate Gillon