



## **Flung Off the Glass Cliff: When Female CEOs Fail**

*Women more likely than men to be replaced as top executives*

<http://www.shrm.org/hrdisciplines/diversity/articles/pages/women-ceos-fired.aspx>

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Valerie Brown was in a powerful executive position as CEO of Cetera Financial Group—until recently, when a management shake-up put a man in her job and left Brown in a consulting post.

Carol Bartz signed on as Yahoo’s CEO in 2009, and was fired—her characterization—over the phone in 2011.

Congratulations, ladies. You broke through the glass ceiling, only to be hurled over the glass cliff.

Research shows that female executives are faced with a double whammy, being vastly underrepresented at the top, and then facing higher odds of being dumped from the job than men are.

The New York City-based consulting firm Strategy& reported in its 14th Chief Executive Study that 38 percent of female executives who left their jobs over the last decade were forced out, compared to 27 percent for departing male executives. And research by New York City-based consultant Catalyst in 2010 showed that female executives during times of economic crisis were three times as likely as men to lose their jobs due to downsizing or closure.

Is there anything HR managers can do about it? Maybe, experts said. But more important, HR managers are obligated to try—not only to help women succeed at the top, but to set a positive example for female employees in mid- and lower-level positions.

Female executives already face a hard task, specialists said, since they are more likely than men to be brought in from the outside, and to be brought on as a “change agent” when things are going poorly. But after the crisis is over, no one may want the public

face of the crisis around anymore, even if she had nothing to do with the company's troubles.

“When we have a crisis, whether it's conscious or subconscious, we need to throw someone under the bus,” said Jon Bischke, CEO of San-Francisco-based Entelo, which uses software to help companies recruit diverse job candidates. Women, he said, are perceived as “more empathetic, better at dealing with people, and that sort of leader might be better in a time of crisis,” while corporate boards may think that “when things are going well, we need a hard-charging stereotypical male executive,” he said.

### **Start Bonding Early**

A new leader “always provokes anxiety” at a company, said Mary Herrmann, managing director of executive coaching at BPI group, a Chicago-based global management and HR consulting firm. For that reason, Herrmann recommends a “getting to know you” process that starts with a meeting of the new executive with her team and a facilitator.

The team is given basic background about the new leader, as well as her expectations and values. The executive then leaves the room while the team talks, aided by the facilitator. Then, the facilitator briefs the executive privately, letting her know what colleagues asked about her, which can include questions as seemingly innocuous as “What does she eat for dinner?” and “Does she drink alcohol at business events?”

After that, the “onboarding” process begins: The executive is introduced to senior team members and given a formal plan, which may take as long as 90 days, to bond with her new colleagues.

The HR department must also ensure that senior staff understand why the new person is being brought in, said Kim Seeling Smith, CEO of HR consulting firm Ignite Global. And the new executive must be made aware of who the players are, so she can start building critical relationships. “HR has a fiduciary duty to make sure that the people promoted in these positions are set up to succeed,” Seeling Smith said.

### **Adaptation**

Once women are in those positions, they must adapt to the environment, even if it's largely male, said Kira Makagon, vice president of innovation at the phone-computing firm RingCentral, based in San Mateo, Calif. Makagon recalled how she once went to a cigar bar, although she doesn't smoke, because the men on her senior team wanted to go after a company dinner. “HR managers can help [women] get that comfort level [and] educate them,” she said.

And if a woman is tossed off the glass cliff? Make sure the next rung of workers—not just the women— know why, said Nancy Mellard, national leader of CBIZ Women's Advantage, a Cleveland, Ohio-based company that focuses on female executive development.

“My advice is to look those middle managers in the eye and say, ‘This company is changing; here’s how we’re changing, and we’re going to be very intensive in how we look at the development, advancement and promotion of our middle level, because we value gender diversity,’ ” Mellard said.

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